



2 A Pioneer in Black Studies and History

ALONG WITH COUNTLESS OTHER BLACK professionally and nonprofessionally trained scholars, Carter G. Woodson was an important member of the proto-Black studies movement. This African American "vindicationist tradition" included many black scholars who during the era of Jim Crow segregation laid the foundations for the modern Black studies movement.¹ W. E. B. Du Bois has probably been the most widely acknowledged member of this black scholarly tradition. While this group was by no means philosophically monolithic, they were bound together in meaningful ways. Most important, they were largely excluded from "whitestream" academe. For the most part, they did not have access to certain benefits and resources located in exclusive, white, scholarly outposts. In turn, they created viable, productive, autonomous academic institutions, scholarly approaches, and practical strategies for black mental and psychological liberation. This overarching philosophical outlook dictated that they create productive epistemologies that established, validated, and promoted the rigorous study of black life while simultaneously and directly challenging white ethnocentric scholarship and social thought. In the case of Woodson in particular, he foreshadowed modern Black studies scholars in stressing that the study of African descendants be scholarly, sound, creative, restorative, and directly relevant to the black community.

One of Woodson's most important contributions to the early black history movement and the proto-Black studies movement was his mission and ability to transform black history into a practical and popular medium for uplifting blacks and challenging racial prejudice. He revolutionized the

American historical profession and democratized the study of black history by extending the discipline to various groups of scholars who were not professionally trained. In adopting this approach, he did not de-emphasize the role of scientific scholarship in the "life-and-death struggle" for black liberation. On the other hand, he maintained that, in addition to being founded on meticulous research, the study and dissemination of black history needed to extend to the working-class and youth sectors of the black community. Woodson reasoned that the knowledge of African American history was, after all, an important and practical (though nonmaterial) way in which black people could become liberated and empowered.

Between 1915 and 1950 (increasingly more by the 1920s), Woodson strove to enlighten the black masses, popularizing black history in a variety of innovative ways. He extended himself as a resource to black communities throughout the country and opened the doors of the ASNLH meetings and activities to lay historians, ministers, secondary and elementary school teachers, businessmen, and the black community as a whole. He initiated Negro History Week and other extension services. And he published the *Negro History Bulletin*, an essential outlet for not only Woodson himself but for countless black thinkers representing a wide spectrum of the black community.

Several questions help us frame Woodson's contributions to the proto-Black studies movement. What influenced Woodson to adopt an essentially pragmatic approach to history? In what particular ways did he democratize the study and dissemination of black history? How did he successfully mesh his somewhat old-fashioned idea that history consisted of the collection and presentation of "facts" with his more progressive philosophy that history could uplift and empower blacks? How did Woodson use his popular scholarly medium to introduce his readers to contemporary social and political realities and concerns? How did Woodson's ideas about class differences within the black community shape his approach to history?



In searching for the origins of Woodson's concern with popularizing black history and facilitating cross-class dialogues and interactions, a logical starting point is his upbringing and early years. Raised by former slaves and sharecroppers, Woodson came from starkly humble origins he never seemed to have forgotten. A seasoned manual laborer from his early childhood until his twenties, Woodson probably identified strongly with the children of black coal miners he taught from 1898 until 1900 in Winona, West Virginia.²

After receiving his doctorate from Harvard University in 1912, Woodson

began publishing a genre of historical scholarship which was accessible to a wide range of readers. He wrote in such simple language that some of his modern critics have considered him unsophisticated. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick have claimed that "Woodson, unlike Du Bois, did not produce monographs that are read and admired to this day," that he "did not function as an influential historian through his own monographs."³ Meier and Rudwick judged Woodson's scholarship based on its existence in the "white-stream" academy. They failed to place his scholarship within the context of his pragmatic philosophy of black history. As well, Woodson published several brands of scholarship: in the vindicationist tradition, rigorous scientific scholarship to combat racist scholarship; polemical commentaries in order to address black America's contemporary status in American society; and books aimed at attracting a wide readership from elementary school students to university students. This last collection of books included *The Negro in Our History* (1922), *Negro Makers of History* (1928), *African Myths Together with Proverbs* (1928), *The African Background Outlined* (1936), and *African Heroes and Heroines* (1939). The unfinished *Encyclopedia Africana* was also written in very simple language. Woodson valued his practical history texts. Several years before it was actually published, Woodson advertised *The Negro in Our History* as a study for use in black history clubs, elementary and high schools, and colleges and universities. "Just as soon as this book has come from the press," Woodson told the *Journal of Negro History* readership, "the Association will send to all Negro schools of secondary and college grade a field agent to interest them in the effort to inculcate in the mind of the youth of African blood an appreciation of what their race has thought and felt and done."⁴

It is difficult to discern how the black youth and laypeople were affected by Woodson's writings. The recently compiled Papers of Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1915-1950, contain elaborate records of books sold by the ASNLH from the 1920s on. While there are countless receipts and orders, Associated Publishers struggled throughout its existence, and during Woodson's lifetime there was not a strong demand for black history books among the general black populace. According to Lorenzo Johnston Greene, boxes of the Association's books were literally collecting mildew in the Association headquarters' basement in 1930. Poet Sterling Brown declared in the early 1940s that the hardest task facing black authors was "developing a critical but interested reading public."⁵ Working-class blacks, especially during the lean years of the Great Depression, did not place a high priority on purchasing hardcover scholarly literature. As Lorenzo Greene testified during his bookselling campaigns, it

was black professionals who usually purchased the Association's literature. *The Negro in Our History* was Woodson's most popular book. By March 1941, Woodson noted that forty thousand copies of his text had been sold.⁶ But his interaction with nonprofessional black communities went beyond simply using the written word.

Early on, the ASNLH developed connections to the heart of black communities. Every year during Woodson's lifetime, the Association's meetings were held in black churches, community centers, colleges and universities, and high school auditoriums throughout the country. Patricia Romero has noted that the first time an Association meeting was held in a major hotel was in 1964 in Detroit.⁷ While the breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners attracted a certain highbrow crowd, and the executive council held its own private business meetings, the keynote speakers, panel discussions, and presentations and pageants were attended by a much broader spectrum of the black community. Unlike any other academic organization of its time, the ASNLH welcomed individuals without doctoral degrees into its ranks and even into its leadership positions. A perusal of the *Journal of Negro History* from 1916 through Woodson's death indicates that at annual meetings, schoolteachers and community activists, including many clubwomen, presented papers and in many cases even had their essays published in the pages of the *Journal* alongside the research of leading black and white scholars. In this way, Woodson democratized the black scholarly community.

Woodson's most famous and perhaps most effective effort at attracting a mass following and popularizing the study of black history was through Negro History Week celebrations. But before 1926, when he inaugurated this celebration, Woodson took black history to the people in other ways. During the era of Jim Crow segregation, Woodson and his colleagues were among the most sought-after lecturers in the black community nationwide. Woodson himself spoke at countless venues throughout his lifetime for minimal fees. L. D. Reddick recounted that during his childhood in Jacksonville, Florida, Woodson was easily "the most impressive speaker" he had heard. The manner in which Woodson presented himself before his audience, his electricity, and his dedication to "the cause" influenced the young Reddick to join the "Negro History Movement."⁸ Woodson also corresponded with countless men and women interested in black history from all around the world. He answered their questions, commented on papers, and mailed them information pertaining to black history. In *Ten Years of Collecting and Publishing the Records of the Negro*, Woodson commented that since the inception of the ASNLH, the Association had functioned as a "free reference bureau."

Early on in the Association's history, Woodson sought to gain a mass following with outreach programs. By 1919, he employed J. E. Ormes, formerly in the business department of Wilberforce University, as a field agent. Ormes's role was to increase membership in the Association, appoint agents to sell books and subscriptions to the *Journal*, and organize black history clubs. In the early years, Woodson called upon any interested individuals to join his cause. According to a statement in the *Journal*'s "Notes" in 1919, "any five persons desiring to prosecute studies" in black history could have organized a club. Each club was required to pay the Association two dollars, a small fee that entitled the member club to a year's subscription to the *Journal* and access to Woodson, by mail, for advice and instruction. He often sent bibliographies and outlines to clubs for study and required only that a club elect a president, a secretary, a treasurer, and an instructor, who should be the group's "most intelligent and the best informed member."⁹

Such early efforts from Woodson seemed to have been fairly effective. Several years before the first Negro History Week celebration, he commented that he had succeeded in convincing schools and colleges to "devote more time to the study of Negro life and history" and that "a larger number of persons" were becoming interested in the Association's work. By the mid-1920s, Woodson noted that black history clubs officially linked to the Association were found in practically all cities with considerable black populations.¹⁰ Woodson also attempted to stir interest in black history among the youth with financial incentives. In 1924, in collaboration with the American Folklore Society, the Association offered a prize of two hundred dollars "for the best collection of tales, riddles, proverbs, sayings, and songs, which have been heard at home by Negro students of accredited schools."¹¹

Months before the first Negro History Week celebration was to take place during the second week of February 1926 in commemoration of Frederick Douglass's and Abraham Lincoln's birthdays, Woodson explained the reason behind the celebration in a "widely distributed" pamphlet. Woodson told his readers that blacks knew "practically nothing" about their history, and that without this knowledge "the race" could become "a negligible factor in the thought of the world" and stood "in danger of being exterminated."¹² He added that race prejudice, from segregation to violence, resulted from the widely accepted notion that black people had not contributed anything of worth to world civilization. He argued that if the historical record was set straight and if the history of black people was studied in schools along with the achievements of others, not only would black youth develop a sense of pride and self-worth, but racism would also be abolished. Woodson ended

his plea with this assertion: "Let truth destroy the dividing prejudice of nationality and teach universal love without distinction of race, merit or rank. With sublime enthusiasm and heavenly vision of the Great Teacher let us help men rise above the race hate of their age unto the altruism of a rejuvenated universe."¹³

Liberal and radical, black and white intellectuals and educators of the Intercultural Education Movement shared Woodson's contention that racial tension was the by-product of whites' historical and cultural ignorance and that education could help alleviate these problems of misunderstanding. Woodson's efforts to popularize black history both preceded and mirrored those of many intercultural education specialists of his time and were an important expression and ingredient of American educational reform during the interwar period. Interculturalists were by no means unified in their views. Like their Progressive Era predecessors, they did not constitute a monolithic group of reformers. They were motivated by the Europeanization of American culture as a result of immigration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many advocates of the Intercultural Education Movement shared the underlying belief that acknowledging the contributions of various subgroups in American society could effectively reduce "misconceptions about cultural differences" and ethnocentrism while promoting self-esteem in minority groups, cultural integration, and diversity in the United States.¹⁴

Negro History Week was the first major achievement in popularizing black history and was unique in that it focused on the black youth. Woodson realized that the miseducation of black people began in their homes, communities, and elementary schools, and he targeted these sites aggressively, focusing especially on the schools. Although some critics deemed Woodson's strategy of gradually introducing black history as a supplement to "white-stream" American history as too conservative, the approach was pragmatic and very radical when analyzed in the broader context of his agenda. Woodson knew that if he had demanded that black history be integrated into the American educational system all at once, his plan would have been too easily dismissed. A modest, week-long celebration during the winter season appeared much less threatening to the white public, to philanthropists, and to those "highly mis-educated Negroes" whom he sought to convert into devout black nationalists.¹⁵

Linking the past, present, and future, Woodson's vision of Negro History Week was optimistic and long term. This seemingly token celebration was to serve as a stepping-stone toward the gradual introduction of black history into the curricula of educational institutions, from the elementary school

years through college, throughout American communities, black and white. He wanted Negro History Week to evolve into "Negro History Year," as he noted from time to time. Routinely, Woodson instructed those observing the week that they needed to diligently prepare for the celebration months in advance, and that after mid-February they needed to continue acknowledging the role of African descendants in world history. "Negro History Week should be a demonstration of what has been done in the study of the Negro during the year and at the same time as a demonstration of greater things to be accomplished," Woodson instructed schoolteachers. "A subject which receives attention one week out of the thirty-six will not mean much to anyone."¹⁶

According to Woodson, soon after he mailed out his first Negro History Week circulars to various educational institutions, presses, fraternal and social welfare organizations, literary societies, and radio stations, "there was a stir in the direction of active participation." He boasted, "There were few places in the country where this celebration did not make some impression."¹⁷ Where there was interest in it, Woodson offered a concrete program along with research and promotional materials that highlighted black achievements from the ancient era in Africa to contemporary times. People who decided to take part in the celebration had autonomy over the week's activities, but Woodson did often offer a host of suggestions.

In pamphlets and articles in the *Negro History Bulletin*, he routinely instructed participants to organize committees for the celebration months before Negro History Week. He outlined the critical steps to success: involving the governing, power-wielding board of education; advertising the events extensively; recording oral testimonies from elders within the community; persuading libraries to order black history books; setting aside one day of every week as a "Book and Picture Fund Day" to raise money to purchase black history books for the community; sending to the ASNLH any relevant historical documents so that they could be properly maintained; organizing black history clubs; and creating a pageant highlighting the struggles of black Americans. Especially in February volumes of the *Bulletin*, he added special suggestions to schoolteachers about maximizing the involvement of the youth in practical ways.

During the celebrations there were banquets, breakfasts, speeches, parades, exhibits, and lectures that were usually held in churches, black colleges and universities, and community centers. Woodson insisted that a significant number of the events be free to the public. For this week, he stressed that speakers and organizers must donate their time to the cause. Schoolteachers, mainly black women, were vital Negro History Week organizers. They

raised funds in their communities and had their students compose essays on famous blacks and events in black history; some encouraged their students to act in historical plays and pageants taken largely from an anthology written for elementary students entitled *Plays and Pageants for the Life of the Negro*.¹⁸

After its inception, Negro History Week continued to expand. In his "Annual Reports of the Director," Woodson noted that every year, Negro History Week drew a greater following. In many volumes of the *Journal of Negro History* after 1926, Woodson devoted brief articles to describing the success of the various programs. He was very pleased that the celebration had eventually made its way into the black churches, self-help organizations, public schools, even into rural areas. In 1932, he noted also that Negro History Week was gaining recognition in white schools, facilitating better "inter-racial relations." With each passing year, the black and occasionally the white press advertised local and national events. Early on, the outlets most active in publicizing Woodson's movement were the *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Baltimore Commonwealth*, *Chicago Defender*, *Palmetto Leader*, *Tampa Bulletin*, *Washington Eagle*, and *Norfolk Guide and Journal*. Later, other more widely distributed newspaper publishers joined in. Various radio stations were instrumental in publicizing and broadcasting Negro History Week events.¹⁹

By the 1940s, Negro History Week celebrations were increasingly popular. Woodson developed elaborate programming schedules. In November 1948, in order to help rural schools with little or no resources, Woodson introduced Negro History Week kits at two dollars apiece. At first, the kits included writings and speeches by famous blacks as well as a play depicting black history. Two years later, Woodson revised them to include many photos of famous blacks as well as a list of books for further research. The cost for this edition was \$2.50.

But as Negro History Week become more popular, Woodson believed that there was a class of people who were exploiting the celebration for their own benefit. In the *Journal of Negro History* and the *Negro History Bulletin*, he routinely warned his readers about "the disastrous methods of pseudo-historians among Negroes exaggerating in spectacular fashion facts of minor importance" in order to capitalize on a movement and transform it into a commercial venture. He was especially enraged with those "impostors" and "mis-informants," mainly entertainers, who, under the name of the ASNLH, reaped large profits during mid-February. At one point, he even demanded that they turn over their earnings to the Association, and he called upon Negro History Week organizers to boycott those "mischievous orators" and

instead call upon one of the many historians whom Woodson trained.²⁰ In October 1941, he offered the following advice to schoolteachers: "Do not call in some silver-tongued orator to talk to your school about the history of the Negro. The orator does not generally have much in his head. His chief qualification is strong lungs—a good bellows. He knows very little about things in general and practically nothing about the Negro in particular except how to exploit the race. Let the children study the history of the race, and they will be the speakers who will put the spellbinder to shame."²¹

Woodson was also disturbed because as late as 1945 many schoolbooks on the black past "found their way to some shelf where they serve mainly to catch a portion of dust raised in that room." In one sense, he admitted the shortcomings of Negro History Week to penetrate into the psyche of American society. "It is evident then," he noted, "that our supplementary books on the Negro supplement nothing in most of our schools."²²

Despite Woodson's frequent pessimism, which counterbalanced his unrelenting faith that his people could humanize American culture, Negro History Week was a monumental movement. Assessing the impact of Negro History Week celebrations on black working-class and youth consciousness from 1926 until 1950 is a difficult task. We can assume that many of the blacks who took part in these events felt great pride in their heritage and that some open-minded whites who witnessed and helped sponsor such events may have changed their views of black history and culture.

Indeed, throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, *Bulletin* readers, especially female schoolteachers, wrote to Woodson, often in great detail, about how they conducted their Negro History Week celebrations and how the processes had influenced them and others. Woodson often published these commentaries in the *Bulletin*. Many testified that Negro History Week had helped transform their cultural and political consciousness. Carrie E. Johnson, a schoolteacher from Troy, Alabama, told Woodson that his work "has been my greatest inspiration in making me want to devote all my time to the study of my race."²³

Nevertheless, schoolchildren were probably the most highly transformed by these events. They learned by doing, researching the lives of famous blacks and acting in plays that depicted the African American past. Woodson extended himself to detail specific things children should do during Negro History Week. In the February 1938 issue of the *Bulletin*, he instructed children to "make a study" of their school's history; collect newspaper articles on "prominent" blacks in their county, city, or state; explore the history of blacks in the professions; and create a play or pageant that represented "every phase of life and every phase of struggle through which the race has come."²⁴

Many of Woodson's colleagues believed that Negro History Week was his "most characteristic creation." Devoted Negro History Week promoter Luther Porter Jackson called Negro History Week "the feeder for every other activity of the Association." In paying tribute to Woodson, L. D. Reddick noted, "[H]is greatest influence upon the public mind came through Negro History Week." Reddick believed that the effect of Negro History Week on African Americans' self-confidence, poise, desire to achieve, and morale "defies measurement." This "mass education program" and "God-send for the Association" pleased Woodson to "no end" and upon several occasions he deemed it the Association's most valuable contribution. Woodson extended himself during this month. For example, in 1933, during the peak of the Great Depression, he spent not only Negro History Week lecturing at various venues, but he devoted himself for the next month "in the field," lecturing and helping people to organize throughout the country.²⁵ "By far," Woodson noted in the early 1930s, "the greatest stimulus given to the educational work of the Association in recent years has been the observance of Negro History Week."²⁶

The impact of Negro History Week went beyond the black community during Woodson's lifetime. In 1949, Morris U. Schappes, a member of the American Jewish Historical Society, informed Woodson that at their annual meeting in February, the society decided to observe Jewish History Week from April 24 until April 30. He told Woodson that their decision was influenced by the success of Negro History Week. Woodson took pride in this wide-reaching impact of the Association's work, telling blacks that they could learn a lot from the cultural nationalism of their Jewish counterparts.²⁷

The Negro History Weeks of Woodson's times were much different from most Black History Month celebrations of recent years. Since the end of the Black Power era, along with other facets of African American popular culture, Black History Month celebrations have been commodified, watered down, and tokenized by a capital-driven American popular culture. For Woodson, it was greatly important for the people themselves, especially children, to create personalized celebrations. While Woodson offered many suggestions, he challenged those interested in discovering the value of their past to do the uncovering themselves.

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In 1927, a year after the founding of Negro History Week, Woodson established the ASNLH's extension division in order to expose more people to black history through public lectures and correspondence study. The Home Study Department was necessary in Woodson's view because it could educate

teachers who would in turn teach black youth about their history and because "various classes of citizens" needed to know their history. This process of education involves passing on information through a series of closely interactive stages and levels. In a tone reminiscent of Booker T. Washington when he advertised Tuskegee Institute's Movable School or Jesup Agricultural Wagon, Woodson asserted that the Home Study program took the school to the student. Woodson's program offered courses at introductory and advanced levels. Only those with a high school education and the desire to "profit by the work" were encouraged to apply for admission. While Woodson sought to make the study of black history and black life more accessible, he refused to delegitimize the scholarly endeavor by abandoning standards. One had to apply for admission and pay a five-dollar matriculation fee. Tuition for one course was twenty dollars, two for thirty-five, or three for fifty-two. Although students had one year to finish the requirements for each course and pass a final examination, Woodson encouraged students to complete the assigned work in two to three months.²⁸

Each introductory course was accompanied by a series of lessons with specific readings and suggestions. After completing these lessons, the student would have (ideally) answered some questions and mailed the "recitation paper" back to the instructor, who would then review it and mail it back to the student with the appropriate comments. Advanced courses were offered to college graduates. More flexible in nature than their introductory counterparts, advanced classes were arranged with input from both the students and the professors. Woodson assured the public that the standards of the Home Study Department were equal to those of "accredited colleges and universities," that nothing is "hastily done," and that "every student is guaranteed personal attention." A brochure for the Home Study Department promoted classes in anthropology, art, English, history, literature, and sociology. The teaching staff boasted leading scholars in the African American community, including Woodson himself, Charles H. Wesley, Alain Locke, E. Franklin Frazier, Luther Porter Jackson, James Hugo Johnston, and Charles Johnson. At the end of the course, each student received a certificate that noted the amount of work he or she had accomplished, and full credit was granted only to those who passed the final examination.²⁹

The Home Study Department did not appear to be successful in terms of enrollment. Further, it did not spread its roots into the black community as Negro History Week had. While Woodson noted that the second year of the Home Study Department went "remarkably well," a year later he admitted that the enrollment was very low, owing primarily to the fees and the stan-

dards of admission. Woodson nevertheless had a positive outlook, noting that those who did manage to finish were prepared to instruct others.³⁰ Such efforts demonstrate that central to Woodson's philosophy was the democratization of American academic culture.

The last major extension work Woodson undertook was the founding of the *Negro History Bulletin*. By the mid-1930s, Woodson wanted to increase his regular readership among black youth, the black working class, black elementary and secondary schoolteachers, and nonacademics in general. In addition, the *Journal of Negro History* was inaccessible to many because of its price. While white scholars such as Edward Channing told Woodson that the price of the *Journal* was too low, some black scholars told Woodson otherwise. W. H. Crogman, once president of Clark University in Atlanta, wrote to Woodson in April 1927 of his regret that "for some reason I did not come into touch with your 'Journal of Negro History' until about three years ago. I subscribed to it one year, and discontinued my subscription because of the terribly hard times and high prices."³¹

The *Bulletin*, on the other hand, had many functions. Written in a simple language to help black teachers who had little or no knowledge about black history, it supplemented "whitestream" American history textbooks of the time and was the vehicle by which schoolteachers and other concerned citizens helped Woodson take black history into the homes of the black masses. The magazine served as an advertising mechanism for the ASLNH's activities, especially for Negro History Week. It also served as a platform for blacks—from elementary schoolchildren to community activists to schoolteachers to professional scholars—to openly discuss and even publish their thoughts about black history. Woodson stressed to potential contributors that only serious articles dealing with black history would be considered: the *Bulletin* was not an entertainment magazine. Woodson also used the *Bulletin* as another one of his ideological platforms.

The first issue of the *Bulletin* was introduced in October 1937 and, like the rest of the volumes during Woodson's lifetime, appeared nine times throughout the year, coinciding with the months of the school year. Until the late 1940s, a year's subscription was one dollar (or twelve to fifteen cents a copy); for some time, clubs of five people or more could secure the magazine for only forty-five cents a year. Woodson also offered bulk rate discounts. By the time of his death in 1950, the subscription price had risen only to two dollars a year (twenty-five cents a copy). Woodson kept the price low and in fact sold the *Bulletin* at a loss in order to maintain a higher readership. Though Woodson was the managing editor, black women dominated the editorial

and managing boards. They also wrote many of the articles, organized and ran the magazine, and encouraged children to begin their historical studies early. Individual issues of the *Bulletin* focused on certain topics and themes in black American history. Woodson adopted this approach so that regular subscribers would have "a brief illustrated history of the Negro" at the end of the year. He also sold back issues bound in one volume.³²

Between 1937 and 1950, issues contained biographical sketches of famous and not-so-famous blacks and whites who were sentimental to the cause; simple book reviews; challenging lists of questions for the readers; plenty of photographs reminiscent of those found in *The Crisis*; discussions of periods and important events in black history; updates about current events mainly pertaining to black schools, Negro History Week, branches, and clubs; artwork by leading black artists; a "Book of the Month" section; poetry; information about Africa and the diaspora; suggestions for Negro History Week; simple plays written by schoolteachers and lay scholars; and primary sources. Of particular importance in terms of socializing black communities and cultivating within blacks' minds a black historical consciousnesses were Woodson's polemical columns, discussions initiated by teachers, and the "Children's Page," introduced in November 1940 at the suggestion of the *Bulletin's* female staff and female readers, who thought that a section of the magazine officially designated for children would instill "the youth of African blood" with pride in their history and culture.

In November 1940, for instance, Lillian M. Rhoades, the associate editor of *Apex News*, told Woodson that she would like for the *Bulletin* "to solicit verse and articles by children." She reasoned, "This column devoted to their contributions will get them interested in their particular page, and familiar with the [*Bulletin*] as a whole. Then as they grow up," she continued, "they will grow up with the [*Bulletin*], and would not be without it."³³ Increasingly after its debut, the thoughts, prose, and ideas of children were featured in the *Bulletin* as a method of influencing other youngsters to study black history seriously. Each issue's "Children's Section" challenged readers to answer questions pertaining to the monthly theme and quizzed them about how they could best facilitate a Negro History Week celebration. Under the guidance of Howard University-trained artist Lois Mailou Jones, the young readers during the early 1940s were also provided a picture to color or paint, a mask to cut out and wear, or a sculpture to cut out of a bar of soap. While Jones gave her readers very clear instructions, the children were challenged to think creatively.³⁴

The *Bulletin* also served as a discussion forum for teachers about how best to incorporate black history into their individual classrooms and their

schools' curricula. They exchanged teaching methods, joined the contemporary political debates, and traded advice about how best to celebrate Negro History Week. In a sense, the pages of the *Bulletin* belonged to black schoolteachers, serving as their autonomous space for generating epistemologies of black history. Woodson encouraged this ownership and dialogue by assuring them that the magazine belonged to them and by publishing their ideas just as he published the scholarship of intellectuals in the *Journal*. Woodson also solicited their suggestions and published them from time to time. The *Bulletin* was unique in that it was one of the only journals open to black female teachers. He included photographs of them alongside photographs of other prominent figures in the struggle.

Woodson's image and voice resonated above his schoolteacher counterparts. In every issue of the *Bulletin*, Woodson wrote at least one column in which he addressed problems faced by black Americans, defined his philosophy of history, and offered his readers potential solutions. Throughout the pages of the *Bulletin*, Woodson articulated his vision of how history could serve mankind. He never really altered his fundamental belief that history entailed the objective laying-down of "the facts." While he certainly did emphasize black achievements and at times employed history as some form of "propaganda"—a tactic he himself despised—he insisted to *Bulletin* readers that "real history requires the elimination of self. . . . Facts properly set forth will tell their own story."³⁵ Woodson wanted history to be a major part of black people's everyday life. He used columns to call upon blacks to act and change the course of history themselves. For Woodson, the status of black people was a "life-and-death struggle." He shared with Marcus Garvey a fear that black people faced the possibility of extermination. In an essay appearing in the February 1940 issue of the *Bulletin*, Woodson challenged his readers to do great things based on the deeds of their ancestors. History was, for Woodson, a tool of inspiration. "To you, then, comes the challenge as to what you will do in building upon the foundation which they have laid. These people whose civilization was marked by the kerosene lamp, the wash tub, the hoe, and the ox-cart disappointed the prophets who said they would be exterminated; and on the contrary they enrolled themselves among the great." Woodson pleaded, "What will you do in the day of the moving picture, the radio, and the aeroplane? If we do not take hold where they left off and advance further in the service of truth and justice, we are unworthy to claim descent from such a noble people."³⁶

Woodson wanted blacks to study history seriously and to incorporate it genuinely into their worldviews. He constantly reminded his readers that the purpose of Negro History Week was not simply to acknowledge and cel-

celebrate blacks' accomplishments for one week. Woodson argued that black history should be taught everyday in the classrooms; that knowledge that blacks *do have a history* could significantly decrease race prejudice; and that if blacks knew their history, they would be inspired to act. Woodson's straightforward philosophy of history as explained in the *Bulletin* was very non-elitist. He believed that anyone willing to invest significant work could act "like" a historian. In 1943, Woodson told teachers that a historian was a rigorous collector and organizer of facts, that children could be historians by recording their families' pasts, and that even those not formally educated could be historians of some sort by writing down, in whatever language, the histories of their communities. Woodson firmly held that the history of black Americans, despite their oral traditions, needed to be recorded by black people. He did not deem anyone who recorded historical "facts" a historian, yet he was committed to demystifying one function of the black scholar and stimulating interest in black history and the historical profession in a widely accessible manner.

Woodson used the *Bulletin* to indict white America for mistreating blacks, to celebrate blacks' abilities to persevere, and to critique his fellow black Americans. In a 1939 essay in a volume devoted to the black church, Woodson asserted that black churches were too emotional, plagued by disunity, and lacked concrete philosophies of social uplift. He was especially critical of the exploitative preacher: "He will come to the church at times during the week to fire the hearts of the 'seeker,'" Woodson charged, "but after he receives his collection he is ready to retire to some other part of the city because he does not care to dwell in their district." Woodson concluded that such behavior existed because "most trained ministers were miseducated."³⁷ Perhaps he critiqued the black church because he realized the potential it had in regenerating black America.

Woodson also continued his attack on black intellectuals and the black middle-class in the *Bulletin*. More than five years after *The Mis-Education of the Negro* was first published, Woodson described the typical black graduate from Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and Princeton as being useless. A graduate of Harvard himself, Woodson used such generalizations in order, he hoped, to spark debates and critical conversations. The black college graduate, in Woodson's estimation, was one "equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man," one without the proper training to help the masses of his people. These "intellectuals," Woodson added, despised Africa and its descendants. Woodson claimed that their aping of white people would not help them or American culture. He instructed blacks to "learn to

do what whites cannot do" and then make the world "much better off" with these gifts. Woodson advocated a "revolution" in the American educational system, calling for institutions that would be molded to the conditions of black Americans.³⁸

In a later issue of the *Bulletin*, perhaps in reference to black participation in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) or Du Bois's and Rayford W. Logan's participation in the Phelps-Stokes Fund's encyclopedia on Africa, Woodson attacked black scholars for working hand in hand with white scholars in what he called "mis-representing" black people. Woodson argued that too many black scholars were blindly selling their research to white research investigators who altered their works to support theories of black inferiority.³⁹ Woodson charged that these black intellectuals lacked character and would sell out their people for any amount of money and recognition within white scholarly circles.

Woodson extended his criticisms to black political leaders. Several times in the 1930s, he championed the opinion that no black political leadership had existed since Reconstruction. He proclaimed that there were too many "inconsistent and compromising" self-ordained leaders who were "working against the interests of the race." Black leaders, in his view, all too often accepted segregation. At times he seems to have given up on black leadership entirely. In the early 1940s, Woodson argued that blacks would gain democracy in America only with the leadership of "the laboring classes" since they were "not obligated to the oppressors of their people" as were their spokesmen or "hand-picked agents."⁴⁰ Woodson's iconoclastic rhetorical strategy was aimed at raising debate within black intellectual circles.

Woodson also indicted the black middle class in the *Bulletin* for their lack of business sense and failure to operationalize economic nationalism and self-sufficiency. Foreshadowing Malcolm X, Woodson deplored the fact that blacks allowed foreigners to open businesses in their communities. He argued that black people lacked an economic program in the most basic of forms. The Great Depression was "a blessing in disguise," Woodson commented in challenging blacks to turn within, to rely on themselves, and to be creative. Concluding that "the Negro's point of view . . . must be changed," he offered *Bulletin* readers several potential solutions. He called upon blacks to open small businesses, demanded that his people, especially professionals, stop wasting their money on toys and leisure activities, and called upon "the man who has few thousand dollars" to make sacrifices for the benefit of those in need. Woodson was especially critical of the black middle and professional classes. He was convinced that they had the power to help the

masses in monumental ways. He arrived at this conclusion not only by studying the ideologies and actions of countless of his predecessors, but also by recognizing the ways in which one person and one organization of committed individuals could serve a "needy cause."⁴¹

Woodson's open criticism of the black middle and professional classes (of which he was a member) revealed not only his impatience with his counterparts' failure to establish more meaningful coalitions with the black laboring classes, but, equally important, his faith in their abilities to bring about their own advancement and liberation as well as that of black Americans in general. In holding such beliefs, Woodson's ideas resembled those of other black intellectuals of his time. For instance, while Charles H. Wesley revised the history of black workers and in the process recognized their potential to generate significant social change, Harry Haywood "not only defended the black working class against the racist attacks of white workers, but he also emphasized its revolutionary potential in the long-term struggle to abolish American capitalism and imperialism." For Wesley, Haywood, Woodson, and others like them, the black working class would itself, without the guidance of an elite black leadership, play an essential role in helping improve the status of black America.⁴²

♦ ♦ ♦

During the era of World War II, Woodson's commentaries took on a much more political flavor. He attacked the U.S. government for mistreating devoted black soldiers during and after the war. He declared in one column that U.S. policies "resembled more the policies of Hitler" than those of a so-called democratic nation. To Woodson, this behavior paralleled the abuse endured by black American soldiers since the colonial era. Woodson interpreted the role of blacks in World War II, and in previous wars, as "peculiar." Like many other black leaders throughout history and his time, he publicized and supported blacks' historical and contemporary activities in the armed forces in hopes that blacks would receive citizenship in exchange for their services. Embracing the "Double V Campaign," he believed that the black soldier's loyalty during World War II would "strengthen his case" for equality and first-class citizenship. He urged blacks to engrave their unwavering patriotism deeply into the historical record so that whites could not deny their basic human rights without denying "the truth." In one sense, Woodson had faith that enough liberal whites would eventually acknowledge "the truth" and undergo significant ideological transformations.⁴³

Throughout the remainder of the 1940s, Woodson continued to publish

social commentaries in the *Bulletin*. He attacked segregation in American social and institutional life, condemned America's imperialist and expansionist ethos in the immediate aftermath of World War II, scrutinized problems plaguing the black community from within, reiterated and clarified the function of Negro History Week, and commented on the changes affecting black people in a global context.

During Woodson's lifetime, the *Bulletin* underwent various changes and developments. The first major change, in October 1939, was the increase in size from eight to sixteen pages. Woodson resolved that black schoolteachers were in need of more information to adequately incorporate black history into their curricula. In order to maintain his audience, Woodson did not raise the price, and by the magazine's third volume, the articles were becoming more in-depth, thematically organized, and more scholarly in tone. During the 1940s, more than a few of Woodson's protégés contributed scientific historical scholarship to the *Bulletin*. By October 1940, the style of the magazine changed. While the first three volumes resembled a small newspaper, the volumes after 1940 looked more like a journal or magazine, resembling issues of *The Crisis*. From October 1937 until April 1950, Woodson's columns in the *Bulletin* became increasingly more political. The gradual radicalization and increased scholarly flavor of the magazine is best explained by Woodson's strong conviction that the magazine was not a vehicle of popular matters or propaganda. He stressed that it was a space where students with varying interests of history could enlighten and engage each other. He tended to couch his polemical diatribes in historical articles and perhaps guard them with some sense of anonymity.

According to Woodson, the *Bulletin* was a successful venture. In 1943, he declared that "nothing attempted" by the ASNLH since Negro History Week "has met with more public approval" than the *Bulletin*. He felt justified in publishing it at a loss because he believed that it was finding its way into the minds of black people, making black schoolteachers more well rounded, inspiring black youth, and even helping to deconstruct race prejudice and foster better relations between blacks and whites. Woodson used the *Bulletin* as he had the *Journal*'s "Notes," as a comfortable place to articulate his dynamic, iconoclastic worldview in simple language. At the same time, the *Bulletin* was one of Woodson's gifts to black people. John Hope Franklin certainly thought so. "The BULLETIN," Franklin noted, "represented perhaps the most vigorous extension of the work of Dr. Woodson into the lives of persons who were soon to share the responsibility of making their communities better places in which to live."⁴⁴

During the four decades after the founding of the Association of the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, Carter G. Woodson helped lay the ideological foundations for the modern Black studies movement. Since the Black Power era, many scholars have acknowledged Woodson's key role in the proto-Black studies movement. Most important, he successfully converted a scientific academic discipline into a practical tool of self-empowerment and liberation. Many decades before the golden years of Black studies, the scope and seriousness of Woodson's scholarship and social activism served as useful object lessons for practitioners of the modern Black studies movement. Dimensions of Woodson's approach can be beneficially adapted to Black studies paradigms of the twenty-first century.



3 The Progenitor of a Twentieth-Century African American Iconoclastic Tradition

IN OCTOBER 2001, Harvard University's new president, Lawrence H. Summers, and Harvard African American studies gatekeeper Cornel West had a private meeting. Neither man was aware of the ramifications that this somewhat historic meeting would have. According to reports from West, who discussed his side of the story in *Vanity Fair*, Summers accused him of frequently missing classes; not producing serious enough scholarship; spending too much time engaged in various political campaigns; inflating students' grades in his African American studies courses; and getting too involved in popular culture by recording a CD with a distinct R & B and hip-hop flavor. West recounted that Summers said he wanted to personally review West's scholarly projects every few months to ensure that they met Harvard's standards. Humiliated and dishonored, West publicized Summers's allegations, and by January 2002, many major newspapers and newsmagazines reported that West was seriously considering leaving Harvard for Princeton. The conflict between Summers and West has generated significant media attention, with Black studies being discussed in a manner reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s. West's final decision to leave Harvard in April 2002 was covered on the front page of the *New York Times*.¹

There were several different camps involved in this debate, including West sympathizers, West critics, and a small group who presented the case in a more neutral manner. According to sympathizers, including Robin D. G. Kelley, Glenn Loury, and Danny Goldberg, West's departure from Harvard's African American studies "dream team" hurt the overall intellectual flavor of the university. West's critics, such as Shelby Steele, John McWhorter, and