

Carter G. Woodson and The Africological Precedent of Miseducation

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Abstract

Carter G. Woodson was one of the most prolific African American scholars of the early 20th century. Born to formerly enslaved parents in New Canton, Virginia, he spent much of his adolescence in blue-collar labor and did not complete high school until his early twenties. His unconventional educational trajectory shaped his critique of mainstream education and its role in perpetuating white supremacy, leading to his seminal concept of miseducation. Woodson's contributions to African American scholarship include founding the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (1915), launching the *Journal of Negro History* (1916), establishing Negro History Week (1926), and creating the *Negro History Bulletin* (1937). This study examines Woodson's foundational role in Africology and Africana Studies by analyzing his concept of the miseducated African alongside similar intellectual frameworks. Additionally, it traces the trajectory of scholarship on Woodson's contributions to Black history and pedagogy. As an Africological work, this study underscores the intersection of culture, education, and socialization in Western political contexts as central to the liberation of African minds.

Keywords: Miseducation, Africology, Dislocation, Afrocentric Paradigm, Black Pedagogy, Cultural Sovereignty

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Introduction

Carter G. Woodson stands as one of the most prolific African American scholars of the early 20th Century. Born in the late 19th Century in New Canton Virginia, Woodson spent the vast majority of his adolescence doing blue collar work—toiling away in the West Virginia coal mines, working on farms, and driving a garbage truck, which made it so that Woodson would not graduate from high school until his early twenties.² Woodson's ingratiation into the early canon of Black Studies is much different from his contemporaries' legacy, particularly the other most well-known graduate from Harvard University, W.E.B. DuBois as discussed earlier, to an extent, his blue-collar background, including being likely the only professionally Western-trained African historian in his time, to having both parents who were enslaved in the United States.³ This undoubtedly fueled Woodson's educational and sociological analysis of race as he traveled for both school and work. Instrumental to the development of Woodson's ideas and critique of the ways that Africans in America were socialized was due to his mindset and on the topic of African American and African history more broadly, said that it was a "...life and death struggle."⁴ At the time Woodson had set himself apart as

an exemplar in African history: his contributions to, not only African American national culture via the institutionalization of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History in 1915, the Journal of Negro History in 1916, the conceptualization of Negro history week in 1926, the development of the Negro History Bulletin in 1937, but moreover his myriad contributions to Africana Studies and Africology through his individually and co-authored scholarship. The purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) determining the relationship between Africology and Africana Studies and Woodson's foundational intellectual contribution, his conceptualization of the miseducated African, vis-à-vis other intellectual concepts that discuss the same ideas and (2) to determine the typical trajectory of a vast body of scholarship which discusses Woodson and his contribution to Black history and Black pedagogy.

Woodson's Miseducated Negro and Afrocentric Methodology

Overall, this work's central thesis seeks to ingratiate Carter G. Woodson and his miseducation theory into an Africological context. Within the framework of the Afrocentric Paradigm, Woodson and his theory fit neatly into the functional aspect of the paradigm, whereby "...knowledge can

² Molefi Kete Asante, "Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950)," in *100 Greatest African Americans: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (Prometheus Books, 2002) 327.

³ Aaron Jeffrey Snyder, *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow* (University of Georgia Press, 2018) 2.

⁴ Quoted in Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (University of Illinois Press, 2007) xi. Dagbovie's work focuses on the lives and careers of both Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzon Johnston Greene. According to Dagbovie, Woodson and Greene were both colleagues who "vindicated 'the race'" throughout their careers through their contributions as scholars in the ASALH during the height of a prevalent and ubiquitous white supremacist Jim Crow era.

never be produced for the sake of it, but always for the sake of our liberation.”⁵ It is precisely due to Woodson’s excoriating critique of African people who have been given a Western education that he produced the theory of the miseducated negro. This theory, while producing a bleak outlook on the state of the African American psyche and the behavior patterns of the so-called elite educated section of the group, was quite necessary in developing an assessment of our mental sovereignty in the time it was produced. This section serves as a brief overview of Woodson’s theory in conversation with the general framework of Afrocentric methodology in light of this essay.

It is no secret that African people in the contemporary moment are facing an array of crises affecting their ability to properly navigate the world landscape within the context of their own culturally and historically relevant practices, ideas and behaviors. Carter G. Woodson himself noted this nearly a century ago when he determined that “[t]he mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself just as the Jews have done in spite of universal persecution” and that “[t]he only question which concerns us here is whether these ‘educated’ persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor.”⁶ Ultimately, the question becomes—how and why did African people get to such a debilitating state and more importantly, how do African people determine ways to circumnavigate these

issues and restore action that perpetuates and relocates their agency to the extent that they can once again be a self-sustaining and self-knowing group? For Africologist Ama Mazama, her assessment was that “[t]he reason for this is that colonization was not simply an enterprise of economic exploitation and political control, as it was commonly held, but also an on-going enterprise of conceptual distortion and invasion, leading to widespread confusion, and ultimately, ‘mental incarceration.’”⁷ This malaise, designated as dislocation by Africologists, is the unconscious adoption of the Eurasian’s alien worldview which is a perilous situation that Africans must overcome in the contemporary epoch to achieve liberation. Education or the passing of knowledge from those who know to those who seek or need to know, is the medium that determines social and behavioral aspirations within a given society. Since education is foundational to our experiences, there evidently is a crisis in Black education given the preponderance of dislocation amongst the masses. Both Woodson and Mazama’s sentiments are echoed by Molefi Asante and endemic to the miseducation and dislocation of Westernized Africans. Asante noted that “[m]uch of what we have studied in African history and culture, or literature and linguistics, or politics and economics, has been orchestrated from the standpoint of Europe’s interests.”⁸ This reifies the point aptly stated by Woodson, as this is indeed the qualities he notes about the education Africans receive in the West. Additionally, the role of education in the socialization of African people becomes paramount to

⁵ Ama Mazama ed., *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Africa World Press, 2003) 8.

⁶ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Tribeca Books, 2011) 4. Originally published in 1933.

⁷ Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, 3.

⁸ Molefi K. Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto* (Polity Press, 2007) 32.

solving a multifaceted issue that impacts their dislocation and must be confronted.

In the context of nations, education is meant to be the vehicle by which a society informs its members of their role within that society. Contemporarily, African people occupy a peculiar and imposed cultural situation whereby they are not in control of their education while living in multicultural societies organized by Europeans under the umbrella of a white supremacist ideal imbedded within all the institutions. This is expounded upon by notable late Black psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing in her text called "The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors:"

[T]he local and global power system structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined; this system consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbols, formation, thought, speech, action and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war).⁹

Welsing's definition of racism/white supremacy (used as synonyms) demonstrates that education is a viable and observable social institution whereby racist practices against African people can become concretized; more coherently we can see how African people are purposefully relegated to a world-wide second-class citizenry that is inescapable for the whole and penetrable only for a few. Put differently, this means that education is not some innocuous social phenomena dedicated to further developing

its members holistically. Moreover, education should be seriously engaged with critique for the Pan-European academic framework but also as a means of re-introducing Afrocentric truth and values amongst the global African presence towards the liberation of the African mind.

Carter G. Woodson, who was a master-scholar during Jim Crow, probably provided the most excoriating critique of the socialization of Africans in European educational institutions. In 1933 Woodson published *The Miseducation of the Negro*, where he delivered this message in his scathing assessment of the African in America vis a vis Eurocentric education:

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. For example, the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, handicap and kill the oppressed...No systematic effort toward change has been possible, for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions.¹⁰

⁹ Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (C.W. Publishing, 1991) ii.

¹⁰ Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, 5.

It appears that Woodson was quite familiar with the political implications of this situation. His comments on the acculturation and maldevelopment of Black people's motivations, ethics, and usefulness to the broader African community by the mis-educated elite is accurate. Moreover, the African race, in the wake of the Maafa, was experiencing an insidious consciousness alteration. The so-called educated elite, spoon fed alien values, were rendered unable to erect the proper institutions that their communities required en masse.

What becomes apparent is that African people were experiencing the ill effects that develop due to the imposition of the European deep structure of culture. Aside from Carter G. Woodson, other scholars both preceding and anteceding him made comments about the distinction in behavior between Africans and Europeans.¹¹ On a cultural-historical level, there were notable differences in the utilization of education and the dissemination of particular ethics and the functions that people played within societies. Characteristic of the ethics and values predominant within the African axiological system were: "(1) the centrality of community; (2) respect for tradition; (3) a high level spirituality and ethical concern; (4) harmony with nature; (5) the sociality of selfhood; (6) veneration of ancestors; and (7) the unity of being."¹² This assortment of

values developed a community oriented people with a high degree of concern for ethics. Developing personal and interpersonal character was paramount to success in these communities. On the other hand, the European deep structure of culture, with its materialistic ontology, desacralized worldview, rhetorical ethical practices, and fundamental alienation, constitute the psycho-cultural-social reality that Africans must operate in daily.¹³ As demonstrated prior in this analysis, Frances Cress Welsing's definition of white supremacy predetermines that the European cultural matrix imposes itself through a variety of social mediums for the purposes of self-preservation and perpetuation, but here education is our primary subject. Unfortunately, due to the aggression of white supremacy, African people have largely been alienated in some way from the seven core cultural concepts of Africans within their cultural institutions or lack thereof due to the sociality of this Eurocentric education.

Finally, one must assess what the content, function and character of the Eurocentric worldview and epistemological project and what the implications of this educational project are on the minds of African people. On the context of the European worldview concerning "work", Jacob Carruthers had this estimation:

¹¹ Edward Blyden, *A Voice from Bleeding Africa on Behalf of her Exiled Children* (G. Killian, 1856); Linda James Myers, "The Deep Structure of Culture: Relevance of Traditional African Culture in Contemporary Life," *Journal of Black Studies* 18, no. 1, (September 1987): 72-85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784611>; Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Africa World Press, 1994) 312; Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Matriarchy and Patriarchy* (Karnak House, 1989) 53-54. All of the scholars quoted here all determined that there are cultural and behavioral differences inherent within the cultural ethos' of Africans and the Europeans. For

example, Diop speaks on African societies as having uniquely developed the veneration and social maneuverability of women, Blyden determined that the African had culturally cultivated a personality that was particularly devoted to morality and Ani determined that Europeans operationalize a "rhetorical ethic" which was distinct to their own patterns of cultural thought and behavior.

¹² Mazama, *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, 9.

¹³ Jacob H. Carruthers, *Intellectual Warfare* (Third World Press, 1999) 42; Ani, *Yurugu*, 312; Myers, "Deep Structure of Culture," 81.

This Eurasian orientation, that is deeply embedded in the Eurasian worldview, can be called fundamental alienation. This is the context of the work ethic that requires work for the achievement of success, progress, and the Good Life but which permits some men to live the Good Life by dominating others who do the hard work but do not themselves achieve the Good Life. Such is the legacy of ancient Western culture.¹⁴

Additionally, he adds texture to this point on “work” in the European worldview and its implications on African people is indeed illuminating:

Work was necessary in order to subdue the earth. The godlike men who direct this activity do not themselves have to work. This explains how work is viewed as miserable and noble at the same time...Since Europeans are the only portion of mankind that have achieved this level of industry, they are godlike when compared to others...Thus, the elite among Europeans dominate other Europeans who all together dominate all other portions of mankind who in turn, with their masters directing them, will exercise dominion over nature.¹⁵

This Eurocentric notion of the distribution of work makes clear what their construction of education entails, not only for themselves, but for others. Because this thought process is embedded in the European deep structure culture it, among other European values, are inherently baked into

their educational institutions. Doubly adding to this education dimension is the politically and power motivated preponderance and hierarchization of Eurasian history and the European epistemological mode.¹⁶ Consequently, Africans who are educated in Eurasian institutions are dislocated and left overall with a fragmented consciousness that usually has an unconscious orientation towards Eurasian history and Eurasian cultural values. Thus, African people, particularly their elites, become useful for the interests of Europe, while simultaneously they are alienated from and not able to appropriately advance the interests of African people on their own cultural and epistemological terms.

The Teleology of Woodson-based Scholarship

There is no doubt the extent to which Carter G. Woodson was a prolific scholar-activist who forever changed the trajectory of the African intellectual scholarly tradition in the early 20th century, particularly in the context of Africans within the United States. Woodson's scholarship and activism was appreciated to the extent to which he was heralded even by the constituents of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, the most influential Black Nationalist oriented organization in the last century. An excerpt written in the pages of the Negro World newspaper heralded the contributions of Woodson:

¹⁴ Carruthers, *Intellectual Warfare*, 42.

¹⁵ Carruthers, *Intellectual Warfare*, 49.

¹⁶ Martin W. Lewis and Kren Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, (University of California Press, 1997) 106-108; Ani, *Yurugu*, 51-56.

Living in a world that worships the history of White races and looks with disdain (if it looks at all) upon what Africa has done, it is impossible to develop race pride and consciousness of racial possibilities in our young men and women unless those of us who know our history and literature shall get this information to those who hunger. ...[F]or there are volumes in libraries written by Negroes themselves, perhaps of the most notable as well as the most easily accessible being the “Journal of Negro History” by Dr. Carter G. Woodson...¹⁷

Whether contemporary scholars recognize the contributions of Woodson as germane to the development of the political and social identity as African people or not matters little, as it is written in stone here in plain. Seldom would Western trained African scholars push to the extent that Woodson had to challenge the socio-cultural assault of Western propaganda and even more seldom would they be praised by grassroots organizations of this magnitude.

There are varying interpretations of Carter G. Woodson’s miseducation thesis but

this work does not contain an exhaustive review of them. Instead, what it does provide is a brief overview of these details as they relate to the education of African Americans more broadly speaking. Part of the reason for the various interpretations of Woodson’s work is hinged on two planes: the nature of Western academia and the gravity of Western ideological hegemony, both of which have debilitating effects on African minds. The ideological components disarm many and leave them ill-equipped politically to deal with historical information due to a long-standing tug and pull between integrationism and separatism.¹⁸

The aforementioned disbarment and conceptual incarceration also entangled the ideological positioning of Woodson’s premier research organization and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History reflected quite clearly this game of integrationism and separatism in the language in which it was founded. Woodson himself described the ASALH as “...the collection of sociological and historical data on Negro, the study of peoples of African blood, the publishing of books in the field, and the promotion of harmony between the races by acquainting one with the other.”¹⁹ This undoubtedly

¹⁷ *Negro World*, April 23, 1921.

¹⁸ Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, 20-21; Harold Cruise, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York Review Books, 1967) 5-6. Woodson discusses the fact that “[h]istory does not furnish a case of the elevation of a people by ignoring the thought and aspiration of the people thus served” saying additionally that “[t]his is slightly dangerous ground here, however, for the Negro’s mind has been all but perfectly enslaved in that he has been trained to think what was desired of him.” Cruise said that “[t]hus it can be seen that the present-day conflict

within the Negro ethnic group, between integrationist and separatist tendencies, has its origins in the historical arguments between personalities such as Frederick Douglass and as Martin R. Delany.”

¹⁹ Carter G. Woodson, “Ten Years of Collecting and Publishing the Records of the Negro,” *The Journal of Negro History* 10, no.4 (1925): 598, <https://doi-org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.2307/2714141>. It would be irresponsible to mention that although this essay understands that, as a matter purely of historical circumstances, Woodson’s contribution and data collection in the *Journal of Negro History* was an

yields itself directly to this tug and pull phenomenon. On one hand you have the expressed commitment to vindicate oneself and the African race through social scientific and historical study, which could be a self-determining and separatist venture of its own, but consequently is wound up in the social validation and moral amelioration of whites as an expressed political and social goal. Put differently, many scholars attest to interpretations of Woodson's scholarship that falls in this bi-compartmentalization to some degree. As far as this work is concerned, this ideological confusion on behalf of Woodson and the ASALH created two different strains of scholarship surrounding Woodson and his contributions in the contemporary moment: (1) Afrocentric interpretations and (2) multicultural education interpretations. Within these two strains of scholarship are various contributions that discuss the data surrounding Woodson's scholarship, his impact on curriculum development, and institutional building and development.

The vast majority of the book content on Carter G. Woodson that this project discusses is biographical in some shape or form and no significant contribution at this level is without at least a surface level investigation of his biographical data. Most recent is Jarvis R. Given's *Fugitive*

Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching, which he explains the gravity and complexity of African education in the context of a history of enslavement whereby the passing of knowledge to African people was illegal and punishable by law through the vehicle of a non-exhaustive narrative of Woodson.²⁰ Pero Gaglo Dagbovie's *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene*, is thorough in that it discusses Woodson's significant scholarly contributions, his popularization of studying African people vis-à-vis the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and puts him in conversation with many of his contemporaries.²¹ Carl A. Grant and others' *Black Intellectual Thought in Education: the Missing Traditions of Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Leroy Locke*, which highlights the uses of Woodson's scholarship and intellectual contributions vis-à-vis others, whereby "[t]he purpose of Black Intellectual Thought in Education is to bring African American intellectual contributions to bear on the prevailing and current education problems facing schools, colleges and society today."²² Jeffrey Aaron Snyder's *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow* look at Woodson and the ASNLH in a

institutionally separate contribution to the intellectual canon of African people before the historical establishment of the revolution of Black Studies in Western academia in the 60s and 70s. Yet, it is both urgent and apt to begin to understand both and synthesize their historical contexts instead of only compartmentalizing them.

²⁰ Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021) 4-5.

²¹ Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (The University of Illinois Press, 2007) 7-9.

²² Carl A. Grant, et. al., *Black intellectual thought in education: the missing traditions of Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Leroy Locke* (Routledge, 2016) xvi.

protracted manner and attempts to illustrate that the organization was the seed or entry point to the nascent Black history movement and a broader understanding of African American history.²³ Maghan Keita, in *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx*, which has a section in particular on Woodson, says that "...Woodson aided in the creation of a 'historiographic shift' that firmly changed the focus of African American focus of African American history from that of the master to that of the slave and former slave."²⁴ Each of the aforementioned works discuss Woodson in lesser or greater detail, tackling various positions from which to understand the holistic nature of his contributions to the African world as is contemporarily known. However unique as these contributions are on their lonesome, no protracted Afrocentric engagement of Woodson has been developed in full. Here, the Afrocentric perspective of the data surrounding Woodson's contributions will, at some point, become fully realized. It is that by which this work sees its ultimate goal, as the material on Woodson currently available is certainly not thin, however it may be repetitive to some extent due to the limitations of a purely historiographic or education-based perspectives.

²³ Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, *Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow* (University of Georgia Press, 2018) 1-2.

²⁴ Maghan Keita, *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx* (Oxford University Press, 2000) 52.

²⁵ Kofi Lomotey, "Independent Black Institutions: African-Centered Education Models," *The Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 4 (1992): 455-456, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295363>; Uhuru Hotep, "Intellectual Maroons: Architects of African

The ideological tug and pull between integrationist and multicultural education scholars also showed in critiques that minimized the impact of Woodson's work in relationship to pedagogy and cultural relevance. Many of the more important details of this ideologically split approach to Woodson's work and Afrocentric education overall can be seen within the context of the separatists' positions. In particular, the need for separate institutions and a completely different set of approaches to pedagogy are a chief concern among many contemporary Afrocentric educators.²⁵ The reason for the focus on pedagogy and separate institutions is discussed prior, mainly the fact that as a Western institution, it is unrealistic to assume that the architects of white-supremacist educational hegemony would deliver an experience outside of their own interests. It is a matter of political, economic and cultural sovereignty deeply undergirding the efforts of separate African institutions and pedagogical practices as outlined by Afrocentric educators. Jeffrey Snyder, seeing himself opposed to the separatist position, opined about the extent to which Afrocentric interpretations of the miseducation concept dominated much of the contemporary literature, claiming that "[c]ontemporary

Sovereignty," *The Journal of Pan-African Studies* 2, no. 5 (2008): 10, https://jpanafrican.org/docs/vol2no5/2.5_Intellectual_Maroons.pdf; Kemet Shockley et. al, "Searching for solutions: reflections on working with a traditional school attempting to transform into an African-centered institution," *The Journal of African American Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 378-379, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-015-9311-3>; Egun Nana Kwame Agyei Akoto, "Notes on an Afrikan-Centered Pedagogy," in *African-Centered Education: Theory and Practice* (Myers Education Press, 2020) 125-127.

scholars have almost exclusively interpreted *Mis-Education* as an expression of Afrocentrism” and that “[t]he Afrocentric label has channeled interpretations of *Mis-Education* along certain predetermined lines, emphasizing Woodson’s analysis of racial oppression and exaggerating the significance of Africa in the text” while finally concluding that “[t]his preoccupation with Afrocentrism has also obscured other important features of *Mis-education*, including the extent to which it expresses the principles of progressive education.”²⁶ While Snyder’s complaint is not completely unwarranted or unfair, his accusation that the emphasis on Africa and the sociology of race obfuscating conversations of progressive education is borderline ludicrous. Still, Afrocentric scholars have remarked on this hesitancy to accept Afrocentric interpretations of Woodson and by proxy the solutions they offer due to the fact that “...it singles out and focuses attention on Black children” while accusing Afrocentric scholars of a form of reverse racial essentialism.²⁷ Additionally, while Snyder is right to put some focus on the broader implications of the *Mis-education* text, he erroneously and paradoxically mitigated the extent to which it has impacted scholars who place credence in an African social and cultural identity. Lastly, there would require a gross misreading of Woodson’s seminal text to not approach

broader implications of the Afrocentric perspective and theory, even at a cursory level. Woodson himself, if he was familiar with the teleology of his own work, would likely find this ridiculous. Within the text, he can be quoted as saying:

After Negro students have mastered the fundamentals of English, the principles of composition, and the leading facts in the development of its literature, they should not spend all of their time in advanced work on Shakespeare, Chaucer and Anglo-Saxon. They should direct their attention also to the folklore of the African, to the philosophy in his proverbs, to the development of the Negro in the use of modern language, and to the works of Negro writers.²⁸

Here Woodson is beyond adamant about the utilization and incorporation of African culture in inculcating the minds of African Americans. At no point is this not explicitly discussed by Woodson. In fact, pages later, he can even be shown underlying the importance of African culture vis-à-vis the culture of other races, but that Africa serves as a foundation for African Americans:

We do not mean to suggest here, however, that any people should ignore the record of the progress of

²⁶ Jeffery Aaron Snyder, “Progressive Education in Black and White: Rereading Carter G. Woodson’s ‘Mis-Education of the Negro,’” in *History of Education Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2015): 274-275, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hoeq.12122>.

²⁷ Kemet Shockley & Frederick, Rona M., “Constructs and Dimensions of Afrocentric of Afrocentric

Education,” in *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 6 (2010): 1215, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708325517>.

²⁸ Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, 102.

other races. We would not advocate any such unwise course...We should not underrate the achievements of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome; but we should give equally as much attention to the internal African kingdoms, the Songhay empire, and Ethiopia, which through Egypt decidedly influenced the civilization of the Mediterranean world.²⁹

While this author would contend to the extent to which non-African history should be taught, due to the extent to which anti-African propaganda plagues our contemporary world, it would be ludicrous to determine that Woodson would not have perceived his work similarly to the way in which it is currently interpreted.

Woodson's Conceptual Development

This essay has covered briefly the background of Carter G. Woodson, but those facts in and of themselves do not completely cover the social and professional nuances and circumstances that led him to the idea of the miseducated Negro concept. Although Woodson's life and work are paramount aspects of his conceptual and ideological development, the most important stages of his life's work ran concurrently with the historical events that followed the

establishment of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and the *Journal of Negro History*, the Association's periodical. Put another way, in order to understand the development of Woodson's theoretical dissection of African education in the West, there must be a thorough examination of the activities of Woodson and the ASALH. While this work does situate Woodson vis-à-vis the larger backdrop of Black Studies scholarship and contemporary Black Studies theorists, it is quite frank to the best of its ability about Woodson's ideological position and the limitations of his data from an Africological standpoint.

To truly appreciate the development of Woodson's idea and its broader relationship to Africology and Black Studies, we must first understand the importance and scope of the ASALH and the *Journal of Negro History*. Most paramount here is the functionality of the Association and as previously mentioned, we know that "[ASALH's] objective shall be the collection of sociological and historical documents and the promotion of studies bearing on the Negro" and that Woodson's position as The Director of Research and Editor of the periodical was primarily responsible for organizing the collection of the data and deciding what was ultimately published in the journal itself.³⁰ The ASALH, and in

consideration, practically all reputable universities and colleges and even some high schools now feature the study of the Negro in that of racial relations or provide special courses in this neglected aspect of our life and history," while stating resoundingly of the organization's capacity that "[t]he Association has rendered a distinct service in functioning as a fee reference bureau for information respecting the Negro. Almost all writers in this field either draw upon the

²⁹ Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*, 104.

³⁰ Carter G. Woodson, "The First Biennial Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History at Washington," *The Journal of Negro History* 2, no. 4 (1917): 445, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2713407>; Woodson, "Ten Years of Collecting," 604-605. In Woodson's own words "[t]herefore, whereas a decade ago only a few institutions gave the study of the Negro any

particular, the *Journal of Negro History*, was in some ways a spiritual successor to the likes of publications such as the *Freedom's Journal*, first published nearly a century earlier in 1827, approximately forty years before African-American emancipation in North America. It is not by mere coincidence that *Freedom's Journal* was initially created and disseminated along similar lines of African upliftment and data collection, as the editors Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm stated that “[f]or we believe, that a paper devoted to the dissemination of useful knowledge among our brethren, and to their moral and religious improvement, must meet with the cordial approbation of every friend to humanity.”³¹ Clearly from the beginning, we see that the journal exists quite literally in the paradigm of a positive narrative shift in terms of the African experience using history and knowledge of self as a primary vehicle for that upliftment. Concurrently, the *Journal of Negro History* contributed mightily to the Black Studies canon via data collection and the initial research and articles published, guided of course, by Woodson himself. While one can debate the extent to which this

research relates directly to Black Studies as it developed in the sixties and seventies, it certainly is not disconnected fully, and if nothing else it remained a singular repository of information directly related to African scholars in America for quite a number of years. This historical fact is duly noted by the immediate adoration of the public opinion upon the first release of the journal in 1916.³²

As important as it is to understand Woodson's miseducation concept, it is equally as important to understand the ideological underpinnings of Woodson's ideas—particularly with the *Journal of Negro History* and the ASALH. With contemporary foresight we can see that Woodson was influenced by fellow educator Booker T. Washington's accommodationist philosophy to some degree. In the first issue of the *Journal of Negro History*, Woodson is decisive in including what may seem to be a benign acknowledgement of Washington, who transitioned likely during the creation of the issue. In his veneration of the deceased Woodson writes, “[i]n the death of Booker T. Washington the field of history lost one of its greatest figures. He will be remembered

facts collected and published by the Association or consult the Director in preparing outlines of their studies and in developing the treatises.”

³¹ Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm, “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827.

³² J. E. Spingarn, Edward Channing, Leila Amos Pendleton, A. A. Goldenweiser, T. Spotuas Burwell, Caroline B. Chapin, F. W. Shepardson, et al., “How the Public Received The Journal of Negro History,” *The Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 2 (1916): 225–32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3035643>; F. L. Hoffman, “An Interesting Comment,” *The Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 3 (1916): 347–48,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3035632>. Hoffman, in particular, made note in his opinion that “[t]he so-called literature on slavery and the negro is, in the main, rather a hindrance than a help,” that “[u]nquestionably, a true political history is of real value, but the social history of mankind is infinitely more important,” and finally, determining that the journal was capable of helping achieve this, said thusly that “[t]he prerequisite for a genuine race progress is race pride. For this reason the past achievements of the negro in this or any other country, individually or collectively, are of the utmost teaching value.”

mainly as an educational reformer, a man of vision, who had the will power to make his dreams come true” and he concluded confidently and proudly that “[h]is ‘*Up From Slavery*’ is a long chapter of the history of a rising race; his ‘*Frederick Douglass*’ is the interpretation of a distinguished leader by a great citizen; and his ‘*Story of the Negro*’ is one of the first successful efforts to give the Negro a larger place in history.”³³ Woodson’s acknowledgement of Washington could be seen as just the respect of one who died so close to the first publication of the journal but it is not the only variable. The general racial terrorism of Jim Crow laws, the lack of understanding of the limitations of appealing to white morality and the intentional utilization of white philanthropy to help fund his institution, may have ultimately led to the ideological posture of the ASALH. Woodson himself even noted the intense financial woes that the organization endured, particularly in the first few years of circulation, making it so that he had to outsource his income by teaching at various institutions outside of the ASALH.³⁴

It is in this author’s estimation that Woodson began formulating his idea of the miseducated African after over a decade of

teaching, research, data collection and publications coincided with the first observance of Negro History Week in February, 1926. Woodson’s thoughts regarding this celebration give much insight into his theoretical development as he described this first celebration, calling it “...one of the most fortunate steps ever taken by the [ASALH].”³⁵ Woodson’s decision to observe a week of Negro history was surely motivated by the years of positive reinforcement from the public in relationship to the information disseminated by the journal. To wit, Woodson details the limitations of not having a repository of historical knowledge of a race of people available, listing various dismissive and racist notions of Black inferiority that was indicative of the blatant Jim Crow attitudes about race that were pervasive at the time both in literature and educational practice. Woodson’s observations and social theory concludes that this phenomena is “race prejudice,” or the “...logical result of tradition, the inevitable outcome has never contributed anything to the progress of mankind” and that [t]he doctrine has been thoroughly drilled into the whites and the Negroes have learned well the lesson

³³ Carter G. Woodson, “Notes.” *The Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 1 (1916): 98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2713522>.

³⁴ Woodson, “Ten Years of Collecting,” 601-603. Again, Woodson details how the ASALH utilized white philanthropism to advance its research causes. After being granted \$25k in yearly installments of \$5k from the Carnegie Corporation in April 1921, which allowed Woodson to become editor and research director full-time and another request by Woodson from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial to study Black people prior to the Civil

War and in the reconstruction of the Southern States which granted another \$25k, presumably in similar installments. Woodson spoke also to the availability of the journal within its initial ten years, revealing nationwide interest in the study of Black life and history.

³⁵ Carter G. Woodson, “Negro History Week,” *The Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 2 (1926): 238, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2714171>; Carter G. Woodson, “The Celebration of Negro History Week, 1927,” *The Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 2 (1927): 105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2714049>.

themselves; for many of them look upon other races as superior and accept the status of recognized inferiority.”³⁶ Although Woodson’s observations of a people divorced from their social, intellectual and cultural history are sharp, he is severely limited in his understanding of the pervasiveness and ubiquitous nature of white supremacy as a cultural element. This is evidenced by his unwillingness or misunderstanding of universalist conceptual traps, namely the idea that proper historical contextualization would bring about a “reign of brotherhood through an appreciation of the virtues of all races, creeds and colors” or in another volume, where he says that “[t]his is the meaning of Negro History Week. It is not so much a Negro History Week as it is a History Week” and that “[w]e should emphasize not Negro History, but the Negro in history,” determining that “[w]hat we need is not a history of selected races of nations, but the history of the world void of religious bias, race hate, and religious prejudice.”³⁷ It is clear here that Woodson’s conclusions about education continued to be refined and while his moral position is noble and apt for the times in which he lived, it is erroneous to assume that familiarizing white America with

the historical role of African people would eradicate the cultural and systematic elements of racism.

The yearly reflections concerning the budding celebration of Negro History Week continued to fuel Woodson’s conceptual refinement. By the fifth celebration distinct reflections about how schools impose self-contempt via Eurocentric curriculums within the *Journal of Negro History* begin to appear that are directly included in the *Miseducation of the Negro*.³⁸ In addition to this, Woodson had been in the midst of formulating this concept of miseducation for a number of years and he noted that the extent to which African people continued to stay in European schooling institutions, then the less they would be of use to their race. He would infamously conclude that “[if an educated African] happens to leave school after he masters the fundamentals, before he finishes high school or reaches college, he will naturally escape some of the bias and may recover in time to be of service to his people” and that “[p]ractically all of the successful Negroes in this country are of this type or of that of Negroes who have had no formal education at all.”³⁹ By 1931, Woodson had begun to theorize why this behavior existed.

³⁶ Woodson, “Negro History Week,” 240.

³⁷ Woodson, “Negro History Week,” 240. Woodson’s full quote for additional context reads, “On the other hand, just as thorough education in the belief in the inequality of races has brought the world to the cat-and-dog stage of religious and racial strife, so may thorough instruction in the equality of races bring about a reign of brotherhood through an appreciation of the virtues of all races, creeds and colors.”

³⁸ Carter G. Woodson, “Negro History Week-the Fifth Year,” *The Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 2 (1931): 126-127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2714077>;

Woodson, *Miseducation*, 5. Woodson’s full quote in the *Journal* reads “The appeal is being made to the schools because in them is the seat of the whole trouble. In their own as well as in their mixed schools, Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African.” Notably, the seat of trouble concept was greatly elaborated upon and included in *The Miseducation of the Negro*.

³⁹ Woodson, “Negro History Week-the Fifth Year,” 127.

The social and behavioral incompetence that Woodson observed formed the beginnings of his miseducation concept. After examining myriad examples of this early form of mental incarceration and epistemological dislocation he remarked that “[t]he Negroes themselves should not be blamed for this [the inability of the miseducated to help the race]” and that “[t]he fault is the sort of education they undergo,” noting lastly that [t]he schools and colleges are so conducted as to produce this result.”⁴⁰ Here, Woodson is placing direct institutional blame on the white supremacist context of the social and cultural infrastructure in Western schools. This demonstrates quite clearly the extent to which Woodson’s applied expertise as a researcher, teacher and historian developed his approach to understanding Black people in education as a theoretician as opposed to simple historical observation.

By 1932 and the sixth year of the celebration of Negro History week, the event continued to grow in popularity. The political influence of the literature produced by the *Journal of Negro History* continued to demonstrate the psychological and behavioral benefits of correcting one’s historical memory. Be that as it may, Black people had begun noticing their historical erasure to the extent that distinct cases were analyzed by Woodson. This included the 1932 Black led public lamentation of the George Washington Bicentennial, whereby “[i]n making an effort to focus attention on the large contribution of the Negro to the

independence and development of the United States teachers and public spirited citizens did much to enlighten the public on this neglected aspect of our history.”⁴¹ This was a public protest organized around this political and racist manipulation of the history their ancestors were involved in. As well, Woodson notes that the public, while invigorated with a disgruntled spirit, had many difficulties with explaining their position as adeptly as Woodson had done for them, concluding that the organizational and economic strength of the racist celebration would be too much to contend with without refined commentary. Woodson’s analysis of the historical erasure is quite poignant. He notes that despite the limitations of the ASALH, they were largely effective in combating the historical obfuscation of the achievements of African people in American history. Woodson ultimately concluded that the effort to reduce Black people only to the levels of their enslaved ancestors was indicative of an attempt at conditioning the mind to accept this lowered social position psychologically. To demonstrate that this was indeed purposeful propaganda and racist obfuscation, Woodson pointed out the many African contemporaries of Washington, including those who reached achievements in the arts, sciences, and religion and those who went to war with Washington for the countries’ independence from the British, to show ultimately that “[t]o ignore those heroes who thus sacrificed their lives and dramatize the Negro merely as a servant or slave leading

⁴⁰ Woodson, “Negro History Week-the Fifth Year,” 127.

⁴¹ Carter G. Woodson, “Negro History Week-the Sixth Year,” *The Journal of Negro History* 17, no. 2 (1932): 120, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2714462>.

Washington's horse is a distortion of history and a reflection upon the intelligence of our citizenry."⁴²

Conclusion

Woodson's legacy remains central to contemporary debates on Black education. His theory of miseducation highlights the dangers of an educational system that alienates African Americans from their cultural roots. While knowledge is a powerful tool, Woodson warned that education without a cultural foundation could perpetuate self-contempt rather than liberation.

Ultimately, addressing miseducation requires historical awareness and a shift in pedagogy that prioritizes African agency, identity, and self-sufficiency. This remains the challenge for Africology and Africana Studies today.

In light of the continued assault on the African mind via miseducation, we must intuitively realize that Woodson's dissection of the African's education problem is an issue primarily of social, cultural and behavioral maladjustment. Said differently, we must understand this education issue as holistically as possible. Indeed, when imagining remedies to this volatile issue, whether that be through homeschooling, curriculum supplementation, or attempts at Eurocentric curriculum infusion, the solutions should focus vehemently on changing patterns of behavior. Mere knowledge in and of itself will not wholly fix issues that have damaged African people's relationships with their values and behaviors. Addressing these concerns remains the challenge that must be braved at all costs.

⁴² Woodson, "Negro History Week-the Sixth Year," 121. Those Africans of note named included: Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, James Derham,

Benjamin Banneker, Thomas Fuller, Richard Allen, Lemuel Haynes, George Liele, Andrew Bryant and an enslaved African soldier called Pompey.

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