

Black History Month Matters

By: Salim Muwakkil

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Critics contend Black History Month is irrelevant because it has degenerated into a shallow ritual.

While reading an interesting story in the New York Observer about the overwhelming whiteness of the magazine industry, I noticed the prevalence of the phrase "people of color." This term has become ubiquitous among progressives as an inclusive nomenclature for non-white people. Ironically, it's a variation of the now discredited term "colored people," once used to identify African Americans.

These days, of course, a person of color could be anyone of non-European stock. Were magazines inspired to take affirmative action and employ more people of color, they could end up with not a single African American on staff.

On one level, this blurring of affirmative action categories may seem to be a good thing--a merging of difference. But in real world America, this practice has allowed us to postpone addressing the lengthening legacy of our racist past and provides another example of why Black History Month still matters.

African Americans, as a distinct ethnic variation in the African Diaspora, were created by slavery. Millions of Africans wound up in America only because they were kidnapped to fill the needs of a slave economy. This process forged a new people, who became American by necessity, and included 12 generations of chattel slavery. For nearly 250 years, American culture dehumanized those it enslaved and, more insidiously, socialized generations of African Americans for enslavement. The nation's economic reliance on slavery mandated a rigid and pitiless racial hierarchy.

The century of official Jim Crow segregation that followed slavery's abolition did little to end African Americans' social isolation or alter reigning cultural biases. Because of

this unrelenting social hostility, the hyphen that connects African to American connotes dueling as well as dual identities. Slavery's damaging legacy includes the social implications of that internal duel.

A thorough examination of this history would help clarify how the past influences our present of African-American disparity. Affirmative action is a compensatory program designed to begin that process. By blurring people of color into one mass, those complicated historical distinctions get lost.

President Lyndon Johnson zeroed in on the program's focus in a famous 1965 speech at Howard University. "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." Johnson made this speech urging affirmative action a year after passage of the Civil Rights Bill had done little to weaken resistance to equal employment.

But since many Americans lacked a perspective informed by blacks' peculiar history, other groups had to be included to gain political support for affirmative action. Instead of a program focused on the descendants of enslaved Africans, as originally designed, affirmative action became a comprehensive attempt to offset discrimination against all "minorities"--a term so fuzzy, it includes even white women.

Any program seeking broad remedies for unfair biases is worthy, but the original rationale for affirmative action was much narrower and justified by African Americans' unique history. Black History Month is an outgrowth of Negro History Week, established by black historian Carter G. Woodson in 1926. He designated the second week in February to mark the birthdays of both Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. The week was expanded to a month in 1976, as part of the nation's Bicentennial commemoration.

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The intent was to feature the racial aspects of our common history.

Some critics argue that sanctioning a racially distinct observation moves Americans away from a common history. African-American actor Morgan Freeman expressed this sentiment in a recent interview on CBS' "60 Minutes" when he said it was "ridiculous" to have a month dedicated to black history. "I don't want a black history month," he said. Freeman's objection is common, although not often expressed by African Americans--at least not publicly. I have no hard poll numbers, but I suspect most black Americans feel the monthly observation has symbolic importance, even if it has little practical application.

Some critics contend Black History Month is

irrelevant because it has degenerated into a shallow ritual. But that problem is one of execution not design. If treated seriously, the monthly observation could conceivably trigger more concern for the accuracy of traditional school curricula.

In fact, that already has happened in Philadelphia where, starting this September, public school students will be required to pass a course in African-American history before they can graduate. Knowledge of that formative history is so essential to understanding the nation's character, we should utilize all public institutions to ensure all Americans know from whence they came. Salim Muwakkil is a senior editor of *In These Times*, where he has worked since 1983, and an op-ed columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*. He is currently a Crime and Communities Media Fellow of the Open Society Institute, examining the impact of ex-inmates and gang leaders in leadership positions in the black community.

**Why a Black History Month?
Rosemary Sadlier**

www.blackhistorysociety.ca/BH_Month.htm

In the 1950's the Canadian Negro Women's Association brought the celebration to Toronto, Ontario. By 1978, Ontario Black History Society successfully petitioned the City of Toronto to have the monthly celebration formally recognized. This celebration is currently proclaimed across Canada.

But why have a Black History Month? African Canadian students need to feel affirmed; need to be aware of the contributions made by other Blacks in Canada; need to have role models; need to understand the social forces which have shaped and influenced their community and their identities as a means of feeling connected to the educational experience and their life experience in various regions in Canada. They need to feel empowered. The greater Canadian community needs to know a history of Canada that includes all of the founding and pioneering experiences in order to work from reality, rather than perception alone.

As a people, with roots dating back to 1603, African-Canadians have defended, cleared, built and farmed this country; our presence is well established, but not well-known. The celebration of Black History Month is an attempt to have the achievements of Black people recognized and told.

We need a Black History Month in order to help us to arrive at an understanding of ourselves as Canadians in the most accurate and complete socio-historical context that we can produce. As a nation with such diversity, all histories need to be known, all voices need to be expressed. Black history provides the binary opposite to all traditional histories. One needs traditional history to engender a common culture; one needs Black history to engender a clearer and more complete culture.

When the contributions of people of African descent are acknowledged, when the achievements of Black people are known, when Black people are routinely included or affirmed through our curriculum, our books and the media, and treated with equality, then there will no longer be a need for Black History Month.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson: Great African Statesman
by Vernon M. Butler (Founding Member Division 330 UNIA-ACL)
April 4th 1983 for the African Heritage Journal

Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950), BA, MA, Ph.D., is truly a Black Hero whose philosophy and deeds should never be forgotten. He has proven to be one of the most important of the Black historians, authors, and social analysts of the 20th Century. He popularized Black History among the masses of people long before it was popular and valued. He recognized and acted upon the importance of a people having knowledge of its race and its contributions to civilization.

In June, 1909, Dr. Woodson moved to Washington, D.C. and found employment at the M St. High School, teaching French and Spanish. He moved to Washington so that he could be near the library of Congress and its vast resources. He located quarters at 1924 Eleventh St. N.W. , for he was in the process of writing his dissertation to receive his Ph.D. from Harvard. Three years later, in 1912, Harvard University awarded Woodson his doctorate. His dissertation had been, "The Education of the Negro prior to 1861", which became the nucleus of his first book, published in April, 1915.

Apparently, during this time Woodson became affiliated with the recently organized Washington, D.C. branch of the NAACP, and its Chairman, Archibald Grimke. On January 28, 1915, he wrote a letter to Grimke expressing his dissatisfaction with the way things were going. Woodson made two proposals in this letter; first, that the branch secure an office for a center to which persons may report whatever concerns the Negro race may have, and from which the Association may extend its operations into every part of the city.

The second, that of which a canvasser would be appointed to enlist members and obtain subscriptions for the Crisis, the NAACP publication edited by W.E.B. Dubois, Dr. Woodson then added the daring proposal of "diverting patronage from business establishments which do not treat races alike." He wrote that he would cooperate as one of the twenty-five effective canvassers, adding that he would pay the

rent for the office for one month. The NAACP did not welcome Dr. Woodson's ideas.

In a letter dated March 18th , 1915, in response to a letter from Grimke' regarding his proposals, Woodson wrote, " I am not afraid of being sued by white businessmen. In fact, I should welcome such a law suit. It would do the cause much good. Let us banish fear. We have been in this mental state for three centuries. I am a radical. I am ready to act, if I can find brave men to help me. Apparently, his difference of opinion contributed to the short-lived affiliation with the NAACP.

On September 9, 1915 in Chicago, Dr. Woodson met with Alexander L. Jackson, Executive Secretary of the new Negro YMCA branch. In addition to Woodson and Jackson, three other gentlemen were present; George C. Hall, W.B. Hargrove, and J.E. Stamps. At this meeting they formed the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and appointed Dr. Woodson, Executive Director, which he held until his death.

The early years of the Association were difficult times, but it did not deter Woodson because on January 1st, 1916, he alone began to publish the Journal of Negro History, a quarterly publication. He distributed the first edition on his own initiative. The publishing of the Journal coincided with the year of the arrival of Marcus M. Garvey. In 1926, Woodson single-handedly pioneered the celebration of Black History Week, the second week in February, which has been extended to include the entire month of February. Because of Woodson's belief in self-reliance and racial respect, it is only natural that the paths of Dr. Woodson and the Hon. Marcus Garvey would cross; their views were very similar. Woodson became a regular columnist for Garvey's weekly Negro World.

Dr. Woodson's political activism placed him in the eye of the storm and in contact with many Black intellectuals and activists of the

1920's, 30's, and 40's. He corresponded with men like W.E.B. Dubois, John E. Bruce, Arthur A. Schomberg, Hubert H. Harrison, and T. Thomas Fortune to name a few. Even with the monumental duties connected with the Association, Woodson still found time to write extensive and scholarly works such as The History of the Negro Church (1922), Mis-Education of the Negro (1933), and many other books and articles as relevant today as they were when first published.

He was never one to shy away from a controversial subject, and utilized the pages of the Negro World to add his contribution to the various debates in vogue at the time. One of these debates were over West Indian- Afro-American relations. Woodson summarized that "The West Indian Negro is free." He felt that it requires time and realistic education to emancipate people. These opinions were the result of observing and approving the efforts on the part of the West Indians to inject Black materials into

their school curricula. Woodson remarked that, "the highly educated Negroes thought that Woodson was wrong to invite attention especially to the race." They told Woodson that they were not Negroes or Africans, they were Americans. Woodson's efforts to get Black culture and history into the curriculums of institutions were unsuccessful. This seems to be the reason why he left Howard University as its president.

Woodson was never deterred from his life's work. He was truly a man of vision and understanding. He was a member of the highly EDUCATED element. The element to which he belonged by training, but not sentiment. Dr. Woodson spent his life introducing the Black race to it's self. The Association which he started in 1915 remains today, with the Journal of Negro History still published as a quarterly magazine. Dr. Carter G. Woodson is a hero who must be canonized and remembered for generations to come.

Brother Vernon Butler went home to rest.
And his ancestors today will always
remember his positive contributions to the
community and the building of the Woodson-
Banneker/Jackson-Bey Division 330 of the
UNIA-ACL. Now in its 19th Year-- we
celebrate the works of Vernon Butler and
Hon. Wm. Henry Jackson-Bey for their
unselfish service and sacrifices.
*May God bless both of these beautiful
families*

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**CARTER GODWIN WOODSON:
"FATHER OF BLACK HISTORY"**

Chronology of his life>>

www.chipublib.org/002branches/woodson/woodsonbib.html

Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.

These are the words of Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson, distinguished Black author, editor, publisher, and historian (December 1875 - April 1950). Carter G. Woodson believed that Blacks should know their past in order to participate intelligently in the affairs in our country. He strongly believed that Black history - which others have tried so diligently to erase - is a firm foundation for young Black Americans to build on in order to become productive citizens of our society.

Known as the "Father of Black History," Carter G. Woodson holds an outstanding position in early 20th century American history. Woodson authored numerous scholarly books on the positive contributions of Blacks to the development of America. He also published many magazine articles analyzing the contributions and role of Black Americans. He reached out to schools and the general public through the establishment of several key organizations and founded Negro History Week (precursor to Black History Month). His message was that Blacks should be proud of their heritage and that other Americans should also understand it.

Carter G. Woodson was born in New Canton, Buckingham County, Virginia, to former slaves Anne Eliza (Riddle) and James Henry Woodson. Although his parents could neither read nor write, Carter G. Woodson credits his father for influencing the course of his life. His father, he later wrote, insisted that "learning to accept insult, to compromise on principle, to mislead your fellow man, or to betray your people, is to lose your soul."

His father supported the family on his earnings as a carpenter. As one of a large and poor family, young Carter G. Woodson

was brought up without the "ordinary comforts of life." He was not able to attend school during much of its five-month term because helping on the farm took priority over a formal education. Determined not to be defeated by this setback, Carter was able "largely by self-instruction to master the fundamentals of common school subjects by the time he was seventeen." Ambitious for more education, Carter and his brother Robert Henry moved to Huntington, West Virginia, where they hoped to attend the Douglass High School. However, Carter was forced to earn his living as a miner in Fayette County coal fields and was able to devote only a few months each year to his schooling. In 1895, a twenty-year-old Carter entered Douglass High School, where he received his diploma in less than two years.

From 1897 to 1900, Carter G. Woodson began teaching in Winona, Fayette County. In 1900, he returned to Huntington to become the principal of Douglass H.S.; he finally received his Bachelor of Literature degree from Berea College, Kentucky. From 1903 to 1907, he was a school supervisor in the Philippines. Later he traveled throughout Europe and Asia and studied at the Sorbonne University in Paris. In 1908, he received his M.A. from the University of Chicago, and in 1912, he received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University.

During his lifetime, Dr. Woodson developed an important philosophy of history. History, he insisted, was not the mere gathering of facts. The object of historical study is to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of the facts. History is more than political and military records of peoples and nations. It must include some description of the social conditions of the period being studied.

Woodson's work endures in the institutions and activities he founded and promoted. In 1915, he and several friends in Chicago established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The following year, the Journal of Negro History appeared, one of the oldest learned journals in the United States. In 1926, he developed Negro History Week and in 1937 published the first issue of the Negro History Bulletin.

Dr. Woodson often said that he hoped the time would come when Negro History Week would be unnecessary; when all Americans would willingly recognize the contributions of Black Americans as a legitimate and integral part of the history of this country. Dr. Woodson's outstanding historical research influenced others to carry on his work. Among these have been such noted

historians as John Hope Franklin, Charles Wesley, and Benjamin Quarles. Whether it's called Black history, Negro history, Afro-American history, or African American history, his philosophy has made the study of Black history a legitimate and acceptable area of intellectual inquiry. Dr. Woodson's concept has given a profound sense of dignity to all Black Americans.

Information courtesy of:

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