

# Progressive Education in Black and White: Rereading Carter G. Woodson's *Miseducation of the Negro*

*Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

Less than a minute into his 1931 Fisk University commencement speech, Woodson had already insulted his audience. "The large majority of Negroes who have put on the finishing touches of our best colleges," Woodson said, "are all but worthless in the uplift of their people." With this sweeping indictment of the teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other black professionals assembled before him, Woodson proceeded to catalog the inconsistencies, shortcomings, and abject failures of "Negro education." The result was a caustic and uncompromising litany that seemed to go on forever. Negro education, Woodson charged, clung to a defunct "machine method" based on the misguided assumption that "education is merely a process of imparting information." It failed to inspire black students and did not "bring their minds into harmony with life as they must face it." Theories of Negro inferiority were "drilled" into black pupils in virtually every classroom they entered. And the more education blacks received, the more "estranged from the masses" they became.<sup>1</sup>

Standing on the dais at Fisk's Fifty-Seventh Commencement, Woodson would have been introduced to the audience as a pioneer in the study and celebration of Negro history. His personal story had a compelling Booker T. Washington, hardscrabble, overcoming the odds quality. The first and only professional historian whose parents had been born into slavery, Woodson himself spent six years laboring in West Virginia coal mines. Earning a PhD in history from Harvard University in 1912, Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, brought out the first issue of the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916, and launched Negro History Week in 1926.

---

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Carleton College. He would like to thank James Anderson, Ellen Lagemann, Joy Williamson-Lott, Jonathan Zimmerman, and two anonymous HEQ readers for their help in improving this essay.

<sup>1</sup>Carter G. Woodson, "The Miseducation of the Negro," *Crisis* 38, no. 8 (August 1931): 266–67.

By 1931, Woodson was one of the most high-profile African-American intellectuals in the country. His weekly columns for the *Atlanta Daily World*, *Chicago Defender*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*, among many other black newspapers, reached tens of thousands of readers. Even though some in the audience would have known Woodson to be an iconoclast with a sharp tongue, none of them would have been completely immune to the venom of his remarks. "When the Negro finishes his course in one of our schools," Woodson said, drawing his speech to a close, "he knows what others have done, but he has not been inspired to do much for himself." "If he makes a success in life it comes largely by accident."<sup>2</sup> One can only imagine what the graduates and their families, not to mention the Fisk faculty and administrators, made of Woodson's speech.

The title of Woodson's speech was "The Miseducation of the Negro." All of the main themes from his 1933 publication of the same name are present here—Negro education was antiquated, irrelevant, and controlled by "outside" interests. It reflected the history, values, and hierarchies of "the oppressor"; and the graduates it turned out lost touch with the common folk. Recognized today as Woodson's "most famous and durable book," *The Miseducation of the Negro* has sold millions of copies and has never gone out of print.<sup>3</sup> *Miseducation* was quite different from Woodson's other books in that it was a polemic rather than a work of scholarship. It also consisted almost entirely of previously published material, some two dozen of his recent newspaper columns, stitched together with a few minor edits and arranged thematically. A compact book, *Miseducation* had eighteen short chapters, all of which had blunt, descriptive titles such as "Education Under Outside Control," "The Failure to Learn to Make a Living," and "The Educated Negro Leaves the Masses."

Contemporary scholars have almost exclusively interpreted *Miseducation* as an expression of Afrocentrism. Literary studies professor Gerald Early calls *Miseducation* "the central work of the Afrocentric movement by a black American writer." Scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante have championed *Miseducation* for its Afrocentrism while others such as Adam Fairclough have dismissed it for precisely the same reason. The Afrocentric label has channeled interpretations of *Miseducation* along certain predetermined lines, emphasizing Woodson's analysis of racial oppression and exaggerating the significance of Africa in the text. This preoccupation with Afrocentrism has also obscured other

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 267.

<sup>3</sup>Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

important features of *Miseducation*, including the extent to which it expresses the principles of progressive education.<sup>4</sup>

African-American figures rarely appear among the ranks of progressive education luminaries.<sup>5</sup> Published in 1961, Lawrence Cremin's seminal *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* established the basic parameters for the study of progressive education.<sup>6</sup> Black educators do not make a single appearance in Cremin's book and progressive education has been effectively

---

<sup>4</sup>“Central work”: quoted in Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (New York: Verso, 1998), 50. See Molefi K. Asante, *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an African Renaissance* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 78; and Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 20–21. On Afrocentrism, see Howe, *Afrocentrism*; Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Manning Marable, ed., *Dispatches From the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), Part Three (Afrocentricity and Its Critics); and Wilson J. Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>In 1975, Ronald K. Goodenow wrote in this journal that “the response and contribution of blacks . . . to progressive education has received little attention from scholars.” He was even more emphatic in a 1978 essay for *Phylon*, declaring that “historians of progressivism have totally ignored . . . black progressives.” In spite of Goodenow's path-breaking articles about progressive education and race, “black progressives” are scarcely more visible today than they were forty years ago. While Goodenow focused mainly on how white progressive educators viewed race and the education of blacks, he advanced two important arguments about black educators: first, that they demonstrated a widespread and sustained interest in progressivism during the 1930s. And second, that many black educators viewed progressive education as a promising avenue to “democratic social change.” Goodenow identified the following African-American individuals as exemplary progressive educators: Senior Specialist in the Education of Negroes at the U.S. Office of Education, Ambrose Caliver; sociologist Charles S. Johnson; philosopher Alain Locke; and editor of the *Journal of Negro Education*, Charles H. Thompson. See Ronald Goodenow, “The Progressive Educator, Race and Ethnicity in the Depression Years: An Overview,” *History of Education Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 365–94; Goodenow, “Paradox in Progressive Educational Reform: The South and the Education of Blacks in the Depression Years,” *Phylon* 39 (1st Qtr. 1978): 60; and “The Southern Progressive Educator on Race and Pluralism: The Case of William Heard Kilpatrick,” *History of Education Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 147–70.

<sup>6</sup>The literature on progressive education is voluminous—the following citations comprise only a sample of the highlights: Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Knopf, 1961); Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1880–1990* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); Patricia A. Graham, *Progressive Education from Arcady to Academe: A History of the Progressive Education Association, 1919–1955* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967); Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *A Generation of Women: Education in the Lives of Progressive Reformers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Jeffrey Mirel, “Old Educational Ideas, New American Schools: Progressivism and the Rhetoric of Educational Revolution,” *Paedagogica Historica* 39, no. 4 (August 2003): 477–97; Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform* (New York: Touchstone, 2000); William J. Reese, “The Origins of Progressive Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 2001): 1–24; David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA:

coded as a white movement ever since.<sup>7</sup> The historiography about progressive education during the 1930s is dominated by discussions of a group I will call the “Big Four”—George Counts, John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, and Harold Rugg.<sup>8</sup> While these “frontier thinkers” are undeniably of signal importance, our understanding of progressive education in this period is impoverished by not taking account of the African-American experience. Woodson published *Miseducation* the same year that Kilpatrick and his colleagues released *The Educational Frontier*, a book that Cremin upholds as the “characteristic progressivist statement of its decade.”<sup>9</sup> I maintain that *Miseducation* deserves a place in the progressive education canon, alongside texts such as *Educational Frontier*, Dewey’s *The School and Society* (1900), and Rugg and Ann Shumaker’s *The Child-Centered School* (1928).

*Miseducation* advanced what is arguably the most fundamental tenet of progressive pedagogy, which is that education must be relevant. Students’ backgrounds, needs, and interests should drive the curriculum.<sup>10</sup> It also articulated the progressive vision, representative of the mid-1930s, that education should aim to reform society, especially by encouraging students to set aside selfish pursuits in favor of service.<sup>11</sup> But Woodson’s educational progressivism was not simply a carbon copy of progressive education in the Big Four mold. *Miseducation* demonstrates that while black and white educators might be equally invested in the progressive ideal of social reconstruction, they could advance very different ideas about what exactly needed reconstructing. For the Big Four it was a volatile and ruthless capitalist system, which demanded

---

Harvard University Press, 1974); and Arthur Zilversmit, *Changing Schools: Progressive Education Theory and Practice, 1930–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>Derrick P. Alridge and Ronald E. Chennault are two of the only scholars whose work has directly challenged this implicit color coding of progressive education as white. For a cogent discussion of how the discourse of “progressivism” fit into the thinking of two pioneering African-American educators, see Alridge, “Of Victorianism, Civilizationism and Progressivism: The Educational Ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois, 1892–1940,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (November 2007): 416–46. On the case for considering Booker T. Washington a “progressivist,” see Ronald Chennault, “Pragmatism and Progressivism in the Educational Thought and Practices of Booker T. Washington,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 44 (January 2013): 121–31.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Cremin, *Transformation of the School*; Kliebard, *Struggle for the American Curriculum*; and Ravitch, *Left Back*.

<sup>9</sup>Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 230.

<sup>10</sup>Here I am relying on Mirel’s definition of the “key elements of progressive education.” See “Old Educational Ideas,” esp. 496. On the difficulty of defining progressive education, see Sol Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies: Toward a New Cultural History of Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), ch.5 (The Influence of Progressive Education on School Reform in the United States: Redescriptions); Mirel, “Old Educational Ideas”; and the Afterword (The Search for Meaning in Progressive Education) in Kliebard, *Struggle for the American Curriculum*.

<sup>11</sup>Here I am relying on Ravitch. See *Left Back*, ch. 6 (On the Social Frontier).

immediate attention; for Woodson it was a vicious regime of Jim Crow segregation. To read *Miseducation* as a progressive text is to recover a richer, more expansive history of progressive education, one that addresses the color line in addition to the “social frontier.”

### ***Miseducation as a Critique of Missionary Education***

*Miseducation* must be understood in the broader context of African-American critiques of missionary education, or what Woodson referred to as “education under outside control.”<sup>12</sup> Northern religious boards such as the American Missionary Association, the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and the Freedmen’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, many with initial assistance from the Freedmen’s Bureau, opened the doors of the overwhelming majority of historically black colleges and universities. By the early 1920s, the rousing missionary fervor of the nineteenth century had dissipated and there was a growing movement on the part of some black students, faculty, and administrators to wrest control of black colleges and universities from their autocratic white presidents and their conservative, white-dominated boards. In philosopher Alain Locke’s elegant formulation, blacks had education “for the Negro” when what they really needed was education “by the Negro.”<sup>13</sup>

Any theory of education presupposes its opposite, a theory of miseducation. For progressive educators, so-called “traditional education” encapsulated the many different ways children were being miseducated. According to the progressives, traditional education did not prepare students for the world they would find when they stepped outside of the classroom. The school, in other words, was lagging behind society, failing to “keep pace with the revolution in knowledge and information that the rise of industrialism, global markets and mass communication had created.” Hidebound teachers, the progressives maintained, presided over a soul-crushing “listening regime,” delivering an antiquated curriculum through rote instruction. The answer to this dismal state of affairs was nothing short of “a revolution, not unlike that introduced by

---

<sup>12</sup>This was the heading of a section of *Miseducation*. On missionary education, see Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); William H. Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001); and Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions in the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>13</sup>Alain Locke, “Educational Aspects of the American Negro,” circa 1925, Alain Locke Papers, Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, box 164–13, folder 18, 1.

Copernicus.” Education would be child centered, not teacher centered; active, not passive; and it would have a powerful and organic connection to life outside of the school.<sup>14</sup>

The African-American critique of missionary education followed the same logic of the progressive critique of “traditional education.” All of the ills associated with traditional education—rigidity, a hopelessly old-fashioned curriculum, neglect of student interests, and so on—were magnified on black college campuses, according to the critics. The black college was “more of a medieval monastery than a modern and progressive institution,” one disgruntled professor said. Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier wryly noted that whites had no problem with educating blacks to unlock the mysteries of heaven but that they had serious reservations about any curriculum that addressed the mysteries of this world.<sup>15</sup> Locke concurred, maintaining that “an obsolete system of theological control” was impeding the development of a modern curriculum and mission.<sup>16</sup>

According to Woodson, the successors of the original Northern missionary teachers were unqualified and lacked the “spirit” of their predecessors. Woodson’s assessment was both principled and personal. He taught at Howard University from 1919 to 1920 and had a spectacular falling out with the white President of the College, James Stanley Durkee, a Congregationalist minister who had served parishes in Maine, Massachusetts, and New York. Durkee and Woodson clashed over issues of academic freedom and Woodson’s refusal to monitor chapel attendance (Woodson threatened to resign on more than one occasion and was fired just before commencement). What irked Woodson most of all was that Durkee was not nearly as accomplished, especially as a scholar, as the black faculty members who served under him. In a private letter written to a Howard University trustee after one of his dustups with Durkee, Woodson declared about the white presidents of black colleges, “It is all but criminal for educational authorities to impose

---

<sup>14</sup>“Keep pace”: Mirel, “Old Educational Ideas,” 481; “listening regime”: Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, *Child-Centered School: An Appraisal of the New Education* (1928; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1969), frontispiece; “a revolution”: John Dewey, *The School and Society* (1900; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>15</sup>Quotes in Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus*, 91, 83.

<sup>16</sup>Alain Locke, “Negro Education Bids for Par” (1925), repr. in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), 248. While the better white colleges increasingly concentrated on secular scholarship, a conspicuous tradition of piety persisted at black colleges. In a 1920 survey of 38 private black colleges and universities, all of them, without exception, required daily chapel attendance. Ninety percent of the brochures sent to prospective students from these same colleges and universities emphasized chapel as one of their rigid requirements and in four of five of these institutions chapel attendance was officially recorded. David Henry Sims, “Religious Education in Negro Colleges and Universities,” *Journal of Negro History* 5 (April 1920): 181.

such mediaeval misfits on Negro institutions when those positions can be admirably filled by scientifically trained Negroes.”<sup>17</sup>

### ***Miseducation as a Response to the Great Depression***

If *Miseducation* was deeply informed by the increasingly vigorous push for black control of black colleges and universities, it was also strongly influenced by the unraveling of the economy. Black Tuesday did not mark the start of the Depression for African Americans. Starting in the early 1920s, black agricultural workers in the South suffered through a sharp decline in the price of cotton. Many African-American city dwellers saw their jobs disappear, “counted as no more than the casualties of a technological age in which several million people were expected to become unemployed because of low skills.”<sup>18</sup> In cities such as New York, Detroit, and Chicago, half of the black workers were out of work.<sup>19</sup> Blacks bore more than their fair share of the burden from the economic collapse. They were, as the saying goes, “the last hired, first fired.” In the early 1930s, whites began to take on what had been considered “Negro jobs,” beneath the dignity of white labor. Woodson reported that black waiters, janitors, and domestics were losing their jobs en masse to whites.<sup>20</sup>

*Miseducation* is filled with references to the economic “crisis,” unemployment, and breadlines. For Woodson, the Depression brought the inadequacies of Negro education into sharp relief. Blacks, Woodson maintained, were being prepared for the jobs of yesterday, not the jobs of tomorrow. Black vocational schools, Woodson noted, were in dire need of updated equipment.<sup>21</sup>

Woodson struggled to keep the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History afloat during the economic downturn. The Association had always operated on a shoestring budget. When *Miseducation* came out in the new year of 1933, the last major philanthropic funds—a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation—had all but evaporated. Bills went unpaid and Woodson was occasionally chased down by creditors.<sup>22</sup> As a historian, Woodson regarded the Depression with a certain distance,

<sup>17</sup>“Spirit”: Woodson, *Miseducation*, 18; Woodson to Jesse Moorland, 22 May 1920, Jesse Moorland Papers, Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, box 126–34, folder 695.

<sup>18</sup>John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 419.

<sup>19</sup>Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds, *Civil Rights: An A to Z Reference of the Movement that Changed America* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 2004), 187.

<sup>20</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 53.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 12, 77.

<sup>22</sup>Jacqueline Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 93–94, 108, 111–12.

trying to make sense of broad social trends such as changes in the structure of black labor. As the head of a fledgling organization, he saw the Depression through the eyes of an individual trying desperately to make ends meet.

### Progressive Pedagogy—"Needs and Opportunities"

A review of *Miseducation* in the *Dallas Morning News* praised Woodson for "making a thoughtful and critical analysis of the whole [educational] system." "His plea," the review continued, "is for a workable educational system for the Negro that will relate to his needs and opportunities."<sup>23</sup> In Woodson's telling in *Miseducation*, his experience as a teacher in the Philippines from 1903 to 1907 decisively shaped his educational philosophy.<sup>24</sup> It was there that Woodson first encountered progressive teaching methods, which aimed to make material engaging and relevant. Woodson recalled how he met a particularly successful American teacher who supplemented his books—which "were not adapted to the needs of the children"—with thousands of objects from the surrounding area. When this teacher taught his students "the habits of the snake," he brought one, presumably nonvenomous, into the classroom for demonstration. When it was time for the students to learn music, he did not begin with the American staple, "Come shake the Apple-Tree." Instead he "taught them to sing 'Come Shake the Lomboy Tree,' something which they had actually done." Likewise he substituted local heroes such as José Rizal for American heroes they "had never heard of" such as George Washington.<sup>25</sup> This teacher's belief that students' interest would be stimulated by those objects, songs, and stories from their immediate environment was one of the basic building blocks of progressive pedagogy. Woodson carried this lesson about the importance of tailoring the curriculum to the particular background of one's students back to the United States with him and it became one of the central planks of his pedagogic creed.

The neglect of the distinctive features of black students' backgrounds was one of the most egregious failures of Negro education, according to Woodson. Having been prepared to "begin the life of a white man," black graduates were completely unprepared to face the harsh realities of a segregated labor market and a society saturated with

<sup>23</sup>"Making a thoughtful": quoted in "Additional Notices of *The Miseducation of the Negro*," *Journal of Negro History* 18 (July 1933): 347.

<sup>24</sup>On Woodson's work in the Philippines, see Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson*, ch. 1.

<sup>25</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 74–75.

prejudice and discrimination.<sup>26</sup> Black students who wanted to pursue journalism, for instance, were trained how to edit a paper like the *New York Times*, “which would scarcely hire a Negro as a janitor.” Business students wasted their time studying the “psychology and economics of Wall Street” rather than studying how to combat peonage, discrimination in trade unions, and commercial isolation. That the education of black students led them to pursue “blind alleys” in terms of their job prospects was of grave concern to Woodson. White youth, according to Woodson, could choose their courses more at random and still succeed because of the numerous opportunities afforded to them. This was a luxury that black students did not have.<sup>27</sup>

A racially stratified economy posed a serious challenge to the progressive education ideal of relevance. How could black higher education prepare students to succeed in a segregated workforce without simply endorsing blacks’ second-class status?<sup>28</sup> Black youth, Woodson maintained, should tailor the curriculum to take advantage of genuine possibilities for race advancement. Along these lines, Woodson suggested that “the Negro college girl” whose mother is a washerwoman should study enough physics, chemistry, and business administration to be able to help her mother launch a modern steam laundry upon her graduation. Similarly, the black student who pays for college by shining shoes should undertake a special study of the production and distribution of leather products so that he may someday start his own business. Such was Woodson’s definition of “real education.” “Real education means to inspire people,” Woodson said, “to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better.” Black youth would have to set aside their dreams of working for Ford or Schwab in order to pursue “the opportunities to run ice wagons, push banana carts and sell peanuts among their own people” (Woodson’s more left-leaning colleagues would have asked him where the start-up capital for these black business enterprises was going to come from).<sup>29</sup>

Woodson noted that some of his “highly educated” peers denounced him for advocating a Negro education program that departed

---

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 9. “[W]e must bear in mind,” Woodson wrote, “that the Negro has never been educated. He has merely been informed about other things which he has not been permitted to do” (*Miseducation*, 71).

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 8, 77.

<sup>28</sup>This dilemma reflects a broader tension within progressive educational philosophy, which Diane Ravitch describes as follows: “Were they [schools] supposed to prepare children to fit in to present-day society? [Or] [w]ere they supposed to change society and teach children to criticize the status quo?” Ravitch, *Left Back*, 203. With respect to how the “needs” of African-American students in the Jim Crow South were often equated with the requirements of a racially stratified economy, see Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 222–26.

<sup>29</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 23, 19, 8.

in certain respects from that offered to whites. Referring to his disapproving peers, Woodson said, "They are anxious to have everything the white man has, even if it is harmful" (in a 1932 newspaper column, he used the more provocative phrase, "even if it is a razor to cut his throat").<sup>30</sup> Woodson thought it was the height of absurdity to "say that people who have been oppressed and exploited do not require special attention."<sup>31</sup> It was common sense, not a capitulation to racist theories of black inferiority, that blacks should receive a distinctive education tailored to their unique needs and opportunities.

We must approach "people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are," Woodson insisted. With respect to teaching elementary school children math, Woodson pointed out that whereas the white children of planters and merchants were exposed to "calculations, family budgets and the like" on practically a daily basis, many black children did not enjoy the same advantages. To maintain parity, Woodson asserted that black children should receive more mathematics instruction than their white counterparts, underscoring that whites attended well-appointed graded schools while blacks went to "one-room rented hovels" without adequate equipment.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to racial disparities in material resources, there was the vital matter of the spirit, point of view, and content of the curriculum. So-called modern education, Woodson pointed out, had been designed to advance the interests of the oppressor. "[T]he philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching," he cautioned. In history textbooks, the Negro was either ignored or ridiculed as a "human being of the lower order," who was "unable to subject passion to reason." Africa, these same textbooks averred, had contributed nothing to world civilization, except "so far as it had been a field of exploitation for the Caucasian." This kind of education resulted in the "enslavement of [the] mind." As Woodson explained in what is the most frequently cited passage of *Miseducation*—when you control a man's thinking, he will always stay in his "proper place." He will go to the back door without being asked. "In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary."<sup>33</sup>

The only way to break free from this "slave psychology," in Woodson's estimation, was to reorient black schools around black life and

---

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 5; Carter G. Woodson, "Has Educating the Negro Made Him a Liability?," *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 May 1932.

<sup>31</sup>Woodson, "The Director Speaks," *Journal of Negro History* 16 (July 1931): 345.

<sup>32</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 5, 8.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 5, 15–16.

history.<sup>34</sup> A perceptive columnist for the *Philadelphia Tribune* said that the crux of *Miseducation* was Woodson's educational program "to offset the alienation of the Negro from his background."<sup>35</sup> This alienation, according to Woodson, had profound repercussions not only for the healthy psychological development of individuals but also for the health and progress of the race as a whole. Without being schooled in the history and background of the race, highly educated blacks labored under the mistaken impression that there was no hope for the masses.<sup>36</sup> "If you teach the Negro that he has accomplished as much good as any other race," Woodson said, "he will aspire to equality and justice without regard to race."<sup>37</sup>

Bringing black life and history to the forefront in black schools did not necessarily mean dispatching with the traditional curriculum. The achievements of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome should not be underrated, Woodson explained, but we should devote the same amount of attention to the Songhay Empire and Egypt. When black students had "mastered the fundamentals of English," Woodson said that they should not "spend *all* of their time in advanced work on Shakespeare, Chaucer and Anglo-Saxon." They should also direct their attention to African folklore and proverbs as well as to contemporary black writers. Noting that black colleges offered courses on European colonists prior to their coming to America, Woodson said, "[w]hy are they not equally generous with the Negroes in treating their status in Africa prior to enslavement?" And while black colleges included Greek philosophy in the curriculum, why not add African philosophy as well? Finally, regarding U.S. history, Woodson declared, "we would not dim one bit the luster of any star in our firmament." No less would be learned about George Washington but students would also learn about the three thousand black soldiers of the American Revolution who "helped to make this 'Father of our Country' possible."<sup>38</sup>

The template Woodson outlined for curriculum reform in *Miseducation* is not nearly as reckless and radical as some scholars would have us believe. Adam Fairclough, for example, critiques Woodson for

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>35</sup>Woodson, "Teachers Accept Assignment"; Ben Azikiwe, "By Midnight Oil," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 13 April 1933.

<sup>36</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 62. In an article entitled "Why We Should Publish Truth in Self-Defense," Woodson lamented the fact that "[a]lmost every year we note the publication of some book which misrepresents the status of the Negro and makes it necessary for scientifically trained persons to write a dozen or more books to counteract the disastrous effect of that particular misrepresentation." Woodson, *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 November 1932.

<sup>37</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 62.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 75, 68.

advancing an “Afrocentric” curriculum, which was based on the false assumption that black culture alone “could sustain an adequate program of education for blacks.” In Fairclough’s depiction, Woodson is a kind of militant, black nationalist, who rejects the “European” curriculum wholesale.<sup>39</sup> But Woodson completely disavowed any Garvey-esque notions of racial purity and separation. If anything, Woodson’s philosophy of education is cosmopolitan, recognizing the history of all “races and nations,” including those “which have been purposely ignored.” “[N]o one can be thoroughly educated until he learns as much about the Negro as he knows about other people,” Woodson asserted.<sup>40</sup>

At the core of Woodson’s educational program was a notion of cultural reciprocity, in which learning about other races, peoples, and nations would only enrich one’s experience. Distinctive communities, of course, might choose to stress a particular subject in order to maintain their cultural heritage. Woodson noted that German communities in the United States insisted on having their “mother tongue” taught to their children. It was just as reasonable for black schools to place a special emphasis on black history.<sup>41</sup>

## Progressive History

To make sense of Woodson’s perspective on the place of history in the school curriculum, it is much more helpful to turn to progressive history in the Beardian vein than to Afrocentrism.<sup>42</sup> Woodson’s position on the teaching of history, as articulated in *Miseducation*, shared three basic assumptions with that of progressive educators like the Big Four and progressive historians such as Charles Beard. The first was a commitment to *social* history.<sup>43</sup> The study of history, Beard insisted, should not simply be an account of “politics, battles and diplomacy.” The “common man,” as Counts put it, should figure prominently. In Woodson’s view, no history of the United States was complete if it did

---

<sup>39</sup> According to Fairclough, Woodson’s Afrocentric curriculum neglected at great cost the supposed fact that “[w]hen it came to literacy and other academic skills, European models were the only ones available.” Fairclough, *Class of Their Own*, 21; see also 332.

<sup>40</sup> Woodson, *Miseducation*, 75, 67.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>42</sup> On how history should be taught in the schools, according to the progressive historians, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 7 (Professionalism Stalled); and Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), ch. 7 (Contesting the Retreat from the Schools: Progressives and Teachers Before World War II).

<sup>43</sup> On Dewey’s commitment to social history, see Thomas D. Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race: An Intellectual History, 1895–1922* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 36–39.

not include captains of industry and common laborers alike. Woodson, as Ellen Fitzpatrick and Julie Des Jardins have shown, was one of the pioneers of social history, embracing oral history, folklore, and material culture as primary sources, while displaying, as did other early twentieth-century black historians, a strong commitment to recovering “the hidden lives of the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised.”<sup>44</sup>

The second tenet was that history should address the “vitaly important problems of contemporary life,” as Rugg put it. Woodson touted the importance of learning from the “living past.” The chief value in studying history, Woodson averred, “is to become better acquainted with oneself and with one’s possibilities to live and to do in the present age.” History should be a catalyst for constructive action, revealing how the “needs of generations vary” and that the mere imitation of the heroes and heroines of the past will be insufficient to meet the urgent concerns of today.<sup>45</sup>

The third article of faith was that history instruction should develop students’ critical thinking skills. The traditional history curriculum, Rugg said, saw too much of an emphasis on the “encyclopedic presentation of facts” and not enough on helping students “to see causal relationships [and] to compare and analyze complex situations.” Like Rugg, Woodson often articulated the progressive criticism of poor history instruction as an endless parade of names and dates, the proverbial “one damn thing after another” approach. In too many black schools, Woodson lamented, students “have been taught facts of history but have never learned to think.” “Real history,” Woodson insisted, not only required memorization but also analysis and reflection.<sup>46</sup>

Woodson would have agreed with Beard that the ultimate goal of history instruction was to teach students to turn a critical, historically informed eye to the “tensions, conflicts and problems of American society.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed this purpose is the wellspring for virtually everything Woodson articulated in *Miseducation* about the significance of history to the school curriculum. The major problem facing African Americans

---

<sup>44</sup>Charles Beard, “The Trend in Social Studies,” *Historical Outlook* 20 (December, 1929): 370; George S. Counts, *The Social Foundations of Education* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 550; Woodson, *Miseducation*, 75. On Woodson and social history, see Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History’s Memory: Writing America’s Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). “The hidden lives of the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised”: Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America*, 267.

<sup>45</sup>Harold Rugg, “How Shall We Reconstruct the Social Studies Curriculum?,” *Historical Outlook* 12 (May 1921): 185; Woodson, *Miseducation*, 69, 68.

<sup>46</sup>Rugg, “How Shall We Reconstruct,” 189; Woodson, *Miseducation*, 68–69.

<sup>47</sup>Charles Beard, “The Task Before Us,” *Social Studies* 25 (May 1934): 217.

in 1933, as Woodson saw it, was that they lived in a segregated society. To improve their lot, Woodson claimed that blacks had to understand segregation in historical terms, specifically as a “sequel to slavery.”<sup>48</sup> The study of history, then, would equip students to understand the present racial landscape in a serious, penetrating, and panoramic fashion. History, in Woodson’s view, was not mere subject matter—it was more like a sense, a way of perceiving the world.

### Social Reconstruction—A Classless Society versus the End of Jim Crow

Ravitch and Kliebard describe a shift in progressive education during the early 1930s from “individualism” to “collectivism.” In the crucible of the Great Depression, social reform fused with educational reform. With the conviction that “they could remake society by remaking the schools,” the Big Four and other progressive educators “urged the schools to take a leading role in planning and creating a new social order.”<sup>49</sup> In the early 1930s, Woodson and the Big Four shared the belief that the American educational system was turning out graduates who were much more concerned with individual success than “building a better group life.”<sup>50</sup> But while they agreed on the basic principle of “social reconstruction,” they had very different visions of what would constitute a “reconstructed” society.

*Social Frontier* thinkers believed that “the destiny” of the United States hinged on “the outcome of the conflict between those who own and those who create wealth.”<sup>51</sup> They envisioned a society in which the material and cultural resources of the nation would be managed “openly and honestly” by all citizens rather than by a tiny class of industrialists and financiers. A cutthroat winner-take-all capitalism would give way to a kind of socialist collectivism based on cooperative effort and “democratic control.”<sup>52</sup> Schools would play a vital role in affecting this shift by exploding the “illusion” that we live in a “classless society.”<sup>53</sup>

Although the Editorial Board of *Social Frontier* saw the conflict between “the interests” and “the people” as the engine of history,

<sup>48</sup> Woodson, *Miseducation*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Ravitch, *Left Back*, 203.

<sup>50</sup> “Building”: William Heard Kilpatrick et al., *The Educational Frontier* (1933; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1969), 193.

<sup>51</sup> The Editorial Board, “Teachers and the Class Struggle,” in *The Social Frontier: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 133. Originally published in *Social Frontier* 2 (1935).

<sup>52</sup> The Editorial Board, “Collectivism and Collectivism,” in *The Social Frontier: A Critical Reader*, 34. Originally published in *Social Frontier* 1 (1934).

<sup>53</sup> Editorial Board, “Teachers and the Class Struggle,” 133.

Woodson saw the color line. The Big Four imagined a world with no class divisions. Woodson imagined a world with no racial divisions. It was the end of Jim Crow—not unfettered capitalism—that animated Woodson’s progressive vision. The defeat of Jim Crow first and foremost required racial cooperation.<sup>54</sup> Woodson therefore believed that the destiny of the race hinged on repairing the rifts between the Talented Tenth and the black masses. This healing, however, would not be achieved by dissolving the class boundaries separating African Americans. While Counts and his colleagues drew inspiration from the emerging Soviet economic and educational systems, Woodson had little patience for what he regarded as the utopian visions of Marx-inspired “radicals.” He dismissed the calls for a planned collectivist economy as “pleasant dreams,” asserting that “a social program based on competition” was the best available economic model.<sup>55</sup>

In Woodson’s view, the promise of “a new program of Negro education” was its potential to encourage racial solidarity across classes. According to Woodson, the segregated black schools adopting his educational program would destroy the myth of racial inferiority and foster a spirit of race pride, bolstering support for everything from black-owned businesses to civil rights. Racial solidarity was the essential precursor to racial advancement.

For the Big Four, rapacious capitalists were the main obstacle impeding dramatic social reform. For Woodson, it was the members of the Talented Tenth. As the Philadelphia Tribune reported, *Miseducation* saw Woodson playing the part of “a modern John the Baptist in the Wilderness admonishing his people.”<sup>56</sup> According to Woodson, all black professionals—not just teachers—had failed to live up to their obligations of service (they climbed but they did not lift those farther down the ladder as they moved up).<sup>57</sup> The Big Four looked to the schools to rectify what they perceived as individualism run amok.<sup>58</sup> In his 1932 publication, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*, Counts called for a reinvigorated education that would lift “man out of himself

---

<sup>54</sup>“Our minds,” Woodson said, “must become sufficiently developed to use segregation to kill segregation” (*Miseducation*, 54).

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 90. He also predicted that radical groups seemingly friendly to the Negro cause would “drop him” as soon as their own short-term goals had been achieved (*ibid.*, 91).

<sup>56</sup>Azikiwe, “By Midnight Oil.”

<sup>57</sup>Pero Gaglo Dagbovie argues cogently that Woodson should be regarded as the progenitor of an iconoclastic tradition of African American scholars who indicted their black bourgeoisie colleagues for separating themselves “from black culture and the struggles of the masses,” 65. Dagbovie places E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) in this tradition. See Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement*, ch. 3 (The Progenitor of a Twentieth-Century African American Iconoclastic Tradition).

<sup>58</sup>Ravitch, *Left Back*, 203–4.

and above the level of his more narrow personal interests.”<sup>59</sup> Miseducation is filled with similar pronouncements. Woodson regarded the abandonment of the masses as the most conspicuous shortcoming of the “highly educated.” Most “highly educated Negroes” were oblivious to the plight of the masses. “Unless they happen to become naked,” Woodson said, “they never think of the production of cotton or wool; unless they get hungry, they never give any thought to the output of wheat or corn.” Having appealed to the Talented Tenth for a “remedy,” the masses discovered “they have nothing to offer.”<sup>60</sup>

The root cause of this estrangement of the “haves” from the “have-nots” was the disdain that the former felt for people of African descent, according to Woodson. “The ‘educated Negroes,’” Woodson averred, “have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because 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.” Assertions of black inferiority, Woodson said, pervaded almost every classroom and every textbook.<sup>61</sup> The lack of race pride was the key element of a backwards educational system in which those who were educated to the highest levels served the least. The bedrock Talented Tenth virtue of education to serve the race had been abandoned for personal aggrandizement and the frivolous pursuit of material things.

The ambitious miseducated Negroes, according to Woodson, made cooperation, the most essential ingredient of racial uplift, impossible. Calling for the redefinition of higher education as “a program to serve the lowly rather than to live as an aristocrat,” Woodson called out the Cadillac driving minister devoted to “fleece[ing] the flock” and the Doctor who was more concerned with extracting “two dollars for a prescription” than actually treating his patient. Teachers, Woodson insisted, “must take upon themselves the revolution of the social order for the good of the community.”<sup>62</sup> They were the indispensable foremen in the project of social reconstruction.

### Putting Progressive Ideas into Practice?

Jeffrey Mirel notes that educational historians have been carrying on a longstanding debate about “the degree of influence that

---

<sup>59</sup> “[W]e can see injustice, crime and misery in their most terrible forms all about us,” Counts said, “and, if we are not directly affected, register the emotions of a scientist studying white rats in a laboratory.” George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (1932; repr. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 19, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Woodson, *Miseducation*, 79, 53.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, 71.

‘progressive’ educational ideas have had on policy and practice in Americans schools.”<sup>63</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a detailed answer to this question, it is important to highlight that Woodson’s educational ideas did not only reside in the abstract realm of theory. Indeed the teachers committed to the work of the Association implemented many of Woodson’s ideas about teaching black history into scores of segregated black schools across the country.

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, perhaps more than other historical associations, included in its mission a strong—even evangelical—commitment to education (due in part, no doubt, to the fact that elementary and secondary school teachers comprised the majority of the membership). Negro History Week provided the foundation for all of the Association’s educational initiatives.<sup>64</sup> When Woodson inaugurated Negro History Week in 1926, it quickly proved to be enormously popular. By the early 1930s, Negro History Week celebrations stretched across the country, from Los Angeles to Boston, reaching into the cities and towns of both the Upper and the Deep South. Progressive educational ideas infused Negro History Week celebrations, which linked local histories to the broader history of “the race” and frequently included public performances of historical plays and pageants written by students themselves.

Detailed reports about Negro History Week celebrations appeared in the *Negro History Bulletin*, a monthly magazine for schoolteachers and schoolchildren launched by the Association in 1937. The *Bulletin* linked together a network of professional black historians and educators and served as a clearinghouse for information on the study of African-American history. The pages of the *Bulletin* reveal a robust educational progressivism, which combined project and community-based learning along with an ethic of service and a spirit of social reform.

An article from the October 1938 issue of the *Bulletin* provides a representative sample of how progressive educational ideas informed the teaching of black history. In “A Method for Studying Negro Contributions to Progress,” District of Columbia sixth-grade teacher Miss L.A. Duckett noted that African-American teachers and students were

---

<sup>63</sup>Mirel, “Old Educational Ideas,” 477. See, esp., Cuban, *How Teachers Taught*; David Labaree, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 151–54; and Arthur Zilversmit, *Changing Schools*.

<sup>64</sup>On the advent and growth of Negro History Week, see Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 106–11; Dagbovie, *Early Black History Movement*, 47–53; Michael Dennis, *Luther P. Jackson and a Life for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 54–60; Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson*, 84–85, 119–20; and Diana Selig, *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 208–12.

obliged to be creative when it came to pursuing the study of African-American life and history. "Much has been written concerning the Negro" but much of it failed to be of use in the classroom, Duckett observed. "This failure," she said, "is because the language is ill-adapted to the pupils' interests, their needs and their capacities." "The field, however," Duckett continued, "is rich and sufficiently challenging to appeal to the progressive teacher."<sup>65</sup>

Duckett proceeded to describe how her students had become interested in the history of African-American music after hearing a radio broadcast of the Howard University Glee Club singing the Spirituals. Under the guidance of Miss Duckett, the children generated a list of questions to guide a study unit about African-Americans musicians and their music. These questions included: "How did the Spirituals arise?" "What are some of their chief characteristics?" "Why are Spirituals important today?" and "How much did the music of the past influence the music of today?"<sup>66</sup>

In order to answer these questions, it "was decided that the children and teacher would work cooperatively with the teacher as guide." The students then agreed on a plan of action and resolved to, among other things: keep a record of their study; illustrate the record with pictures and drawings; interview "old persons" for aid in getting information; read stories about singers such as Roland Hayes; learn some of the Spirituals; write original stories, poems and songs; and share their experiences with other children in school. The unit culminated with the publication of a class booklet, which was handsewn and bound by students during their "Industrial Arts" periods. The unit, Duckett said, was a testament to the importance of "constant, united effort and cooperative planning in the interest of all."<sup>67</sup> Duckett underscored that it was important for the students to compare their own cooperative efforts in the classroom to those required to secure "progress" and "freedom" for the race beyond the school walls.

While the Big Four and their colleagues appear to have found "little support" for their vision of schools dedicated to teaching the virtues of a classless society, it seems that the black progressive vision of schools devoted to racial solidarity and the ultimate dismantling of the color line gained a little more traction.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the "miracles" of the socialist revolution in Russia were too foreign to capture the imagination of most Americans, whether white or black. However that

---

<sup>65</sup>L. A. Duckett, "A Method for Studying Negro Contributions to Progress," *Negro History Bulletin* 2 (October 1938): 3.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup>"Little support": Ravitch, *Left Back*, 232.

may have been, for African Americans, Jim Crow presented a familiar and urgent problem, making the possibility that schools might serve as vehicles of social reform that much more resonant.

## Conclusion

Derrick Alridge, Ronald Butchart, and Milton Gaither have all argued persuasively that African-American educators adapted mainstream discourses such as “civilizationism” and “progressivism” to “fit the realities and circumstances of black life” in the early twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> This was, according to Gaither, a process not only of “appropriation” but also one of “subversion.”<sup>70</sup> In *Miseducation*, Woodson clearly borrowed and transformed the concepts, language, and ideals of progressive education. It is difficult, however, to determine exactly how familiar Woodson was with the work of the Big Four and other progressive educators. In contrast to, say, *Journal of Negro Education* editor Charles H. Thompson, Woodson was not a card-carrying member of the Progressive Education Association. He did not publish his work in progressive education journals. Nor did he attend progressive education conferences. I have also found no archival evidence that he corresponded with the leading white figures in progressive education. Woodson was at the very least familiar with the work of Dewey.<sup>71</sup> And I suspect that he was cognizant of the main thrust behind “social frontier” thinking as well.

Woodson’s work does not appear to have registered in progressive education circles. This speaks to the fact that African-American education did not rank high on the agenda of white progressive educators during the 1930s. The two key progressive education journals of the 1930s—*Progressive Education* and *Social Frontier*—all but ignored black education and rarely, if ever, referred to the work of African-American scholars. In the issues spanning the years from 1931 to 1939, *Progressive Education* published a single article that focused on progressive education in black classrooms.<sup>72</sup> With respect to *Social Frontier*, from its first issue in 1936 to its last in 1939, no feature articles addressed African-American education on more than a cursory level. If the Big Four paid

---

<sup>69</sup>Alridge, “Of Victorianism, Civilizationism and Progressivism”; Ronald Butchart, “Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World: A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28 (Autumn 1988): 333–66; and Milton Gaither, *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 109–20. “Fit the realities”: Alridge, 417.

<sup>70</sup>Gaither, *American Educational History Revisited*, 118.

<sup>71</sup>He makes a glancing reference to Dewey in *Miseducation*; see p. 78.

<sup>72</sup>See Helen Adele Whiting, “Negro Children Study Race Culture,” *Progressive Education* 12 (March 1935): 172–81.

more attention to race than many of their white colleagues, the “race question” was not central to their progressive educational philosophies in the 1930s.<sup>73</sup>

What does it mean that Woodson’s educational progressivism ran largely in parallel to mainstream progressive education? It suggests that we need to consider that there was a distinctive strand of black progressive education in the 1930s. Examining this strand offers the promise of a fuller, more nuanced picture of progressive education’s reach and influence as well as its protean character. Many of the black educators affiliated with Woodson’s Association embraced the pedagogical reforms of progressive education, reorienting their lessons around the lives of their students and the life of the surrounding community. They also embraced education for the “common good” over and above narrow, personal interests. “Real education,” centered on the study of African-American life and history, attempted to address simultaneously the interests of children, the needs of the community, and the strivings of the race.<sup>74</sup>

The color line that divided black and white schools continues to shape our interpretations of progressive education, especially with respect to our assessments of who and what qualifies as “progressive.” Segregation, Woodson observed, “is so subtle that men have participated in promoting it without knowing what they were doing.”<sup>75</sup> So we have a “progressive” educator like John Dewey, in one corner; and an “Afrocentric” educator like Woodson, in another. In rereading *Miseducation of the Negro*, we discover a rich philosophy of progressive education that was previously obscured. This philosophy was animated by the ideal of

---

<sup>73</sup>Summing up progressive education’s stance on race during the Great Depression, Goodenow writes: “In its stress on tolerance there is little evidence of interest in actual race relations or careful study of the place of race and ethnicity in the American social fabric” (“The Progressive Educator, Race and Ethnicity in the Depression Years,” 382). For an extended discussion of the role race played in Dewey’s educational philosophy, see Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race*; for a discussion of Kilpatrick’s views about race, see Goodenow, “The Southern Progressive Educator on Race and Pluralism.”

<sup>74</sup>According to Ravitch, the most significant unresolved tension in progressive education in the wake of the Great Depression was that between progressive ideas about pedagogy and progressive ideas about “social reconstruction.” “Progressive education always contained complex currents under its broad umbrella,” Ravitch writes, “but none so dissonant as the simultaneous calls for child-centered schools and schools that would reform society” (*Left Back*, 202–3). The example of the Association, however, shows that pedagogical progressivism and social reform progressivism were not always in conflict.

<sup>75</sup>Woodson, *Miseducation*, 51. As incisive chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance George Hutchinson argues, when we study the Jim Crow era, it is not uncommon for us to make false or misleading “distinctions between black and white identities,” using logic that implicitly follows that of the color line. George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1.

relevance—that schooling should relate to students’ backgrounds and prepare them for the world that waited beyond the classroom walls. What was most relevant to African-American students, circa 1933, was the fact that they were black. So, a serious reckoning with race was at the heart of Woodson’s program of Negro education—what role race played in U.S. and World history; what role it played in structuring opportunity; and what role “the race” should play, particularly the Talented Tenth, in working cooperatively to dismantle the edifice of Jim Crow.