



**WALKING WITH WOODSON IN HISTORY:  
SEEKING TRUTH, JUSTICE AND TRANSFORMATION**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**W**E OWE THIS MONTH of meditation, celebration and recommitment to increased study of our history to Dr. Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950), the founder of Black History Month, who rose up from the evil and debilitating depths of post-Holocaust segregation and suppression to point to a new way to understand and assert ourselves in history and the world. An activist-scholar, he embraced the African concept that possessing knowledge carries with it an ethical obligation to share it and use it in the advancement of good in the world. Thus, he spent his life teaching and institution-building to share his knowledge, empower his people and contribute to the reconception and reconstruction of history and society in the interest of truth, justice and social transformation.

Woodson wanted us to understand ourselves in expansive ways, to conceive of African history as central to U.S. history and the history of the world, a window and way to understand and assert ourselves from a unique and fruitful vantage point. Furthermore, Woodson, like DuBois, Bethune and other educators and leaders of that era, believed that White folks were essentially racist because of ignorance about Black people and illusions of superiority about themselves. He believed that exposing them to a massive dose of the mind-opening evidence of history could free them from such unawareness and inanities and make us and the world safer and freer in the process.

Woodson, who earned his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University (1912), was not simply a historian, but also a teacher who had taught in public school and knew the value and transforming power of education. Raised by parents who had been born and lived during the unrelenting radical evil of the Holocaust of enslavement and having grown up in the midst of savage segregation himself,

Woodson also valued freedom and democracy and resolutely resisted the racist constraints which prevented and perverted them.

He would teach freedom by freeing the mind, cultivating a life of the mind that grounded and enhanced in dignity-affirming and life-enhancing ways how African people understood and asserted themselves in the world. He wanted us to understand and act with the knowledge imparted by our ancient ancestors, the Egyptians. And this was that we are not just in history, we are history and that given this “every day is a donation to eternity and even one hour is a contribution to the future.

Thus, he began to develop a comprehensive strategy, with historical education as its centerpiece, to achieve several educational and social goals. His overall strategy, then, sought: (1) to elevate and expand Black historical knowledge and self-consciousness and teach the rich resource and reward of history; (2) to critique and correct the falsification and misconceptions of Black history; (3) to critique and correct White racist consciousness and self-congratulatory conceptions of history; (4) to integrate Black history in the educational system and social lives of the people; and (5) to use this process in the interest of remaking America and expanding the realm of freedom and democracy.

Woodson’s conception of history is comprehensive and inclusive and prefigures and influences the Kawaida conception of history as a source of lessons, victorious spirit, models of human excellence, and the obligation to remember and advance the ancient and ongoing legacy of our ancestors. To disseminate his message and make Black history an accessible resource for everyone, he trained teachers; started history study clubs; used the media; taught; lectured; wrote letters and sent literature; wrote extensively and published

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scholarly and popular books and articles; involved community elders; and encouraged documentation and activities of remembrance and reinforcement.

Also to expand his work and encourage other scholars, professionals and lay persons to participate in his project, he created several institutions and organs. Dr. Woodson formed the Association for the Study of Negro (African American) Life and History (1915), for the expressed purpose of “the collection of sociological and historical data on the Negro, the study of peoples of African blood, the publishing of books in this field, and the promotion of harmony between the races”. In 1916, he edited and published the first issue of the *Journal of Negro History* which he defined as “a quarterly scientific magazine committed to publishing scholarly research and documents on the history and cultures of Africa and the peoples of African descent around the world”.

In 1926, Woodson inaugurated the celebration of Negro History Week. He noted in an article in the *JNH* explaining the importance of the study and dissemination of Black history that it was designed to teach the meaning and achievements of Black people, and insure Black people not become “a negligible factor in the thought of the world”. Woodson also established the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937 to increase readership among Black public school teachers, working class persons and youth, as well as laypersons in general. Again, his stress was on maximum outreach and engagement.

Woodson was especially concerned, as he expressed in the title and content of his classic work, with *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933) which he reasoned, was caused by both bad history and cultivated historical amnesia. For him, the historical and social education of Black people was directed toward

disorientation and domination and designed to control Black people’s thinking and deprive them of the capacity of independent thought and self-determination. In a classic assertion in this text, he notes that if you control a person’s thinking and cultivate a sense of inferiority, “you will not need to tell him to go to the back door. He will go without being told, and if there is no back door, he will have one cut for his special benefit”. Likewise, for Woodson, the practice of freedom begins in the mind and ultimately fulfills itself in liberating and liberated action. Thus, Woodson’s historical project was not simply “vindicationist” or “contributionist” as is usually argued. Rather, it was emancipatory, both as critique and corrective, directed toward freedom from mental and social constraints and new ways to understand, interpret and make history.

**I**n an essay in the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1940, Dr. Woodson challenged Africans to dare greatness and emulate the deeds of their ancestors. He said, “To you then comes the challenge of what you will do in building upon the foundation which they have laid”. He noted that in spite of the hardships, oppression and discrimination that confronted them, Black people have “disappointed the prophets who said they would be exterminated, and on the contrary they enrolled themselves among the great”. He then asked what we will do in our time with more advantages and access. And he states that “If we do not take hold where they left off and advance further in the service of truth and justice, we are unworthy to claim descent from such a noble people”. This is our challenge and it cannot be changed or left to chance, but can be met by self-consciously taking our history in our own hands and directing it toward good and expansive ends in the interest of ourselves, humankind and the well-being of the world.

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*,  
[www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).