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Reading Afrocentric History

Anita L. Allen*

I. The Purchase

When I was a law student, I purchased *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process*¹ on the recommendation of a close friend. My friend had clerked for Judge Joseph Weis on the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. He suggested the book to me, saying only that its author, A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., whom he had observed many times on the bench, was a “good judge.”

I did not read the book right away. If the truth be told, I bought the book as much to own it as to read it. Like my copy of Derrick Bell’s textbook, *Race, Racism and American Law*,² Higginbotham’s book symbolized an aspiration I probably shared with other busy black law students in the 1980s—to learn something about black legal history someday, in my spare time. Thus, the chocolate brown Oxford University Press paperback sat waiting on a shelf. Its unexamined pages turned crisp and yellow as I completed law school, worked a year on Wall Street, and began teaching law.

I finally read *In the Matter of Color* in the course of writing a book of my own.³ My manuscript was about women’s privacy and my research had focused, like most writing in the field, on affluent and middle-class white women. One day it occurred to me that I should look for facts about the legal regulation of black women’s private choices during the period of American slavery. Searching through historical materials close at hand, I came across Higginbotham’s book. I had only modest expectations about how valuable the book would be for my feminist project. I lowered my expectations further when I removed *In the Matter of Color* from the bookcase and rediscovered its subtitle: “The Colonial Period.” My primary interest was the nineteenth century! The book proved

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1. A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process* (1978).

2. Derrick A. Bell, *Race, Racism and American Law* (1972).

3. Anita L. Allen, *Uneasy Access: Privacy for Women in a Free Society* (1988).

to be, nonetheless, invaluable. Its ultimate significance far outstripped its immediate utility.⁴

Once I began reading *In the Matter of Color*, I could not put it down. The incredible story that Higginbotham's credible scholarship narrated was gripping. Social science had never been more interesting. A kind of "family history" emerged from Higginbotham's account of colonial law. Puzzling features of my personal experience as a product of southern black parents began to acquire broader, social meaning. As I finished reading the book, I wept.

I grieved for the myriad men and women, some of them my African and Native American ancestors, who had been enslaved, beaten, raped and lynched despite, and often because of, the rule of law. I felt ashamed of my frequently blasé attitude about African American history and scholarship. I was angry at the role teachers and school officials at the public and private schools I attended had played in keeping me ignorant.

My teachers—the overwhelmingly majority of whom were not African Americans—conveyed through their example and curricula that black cultures and perspectives are of marginal importance. I understood my high school, college and university teachers to say: "*If one is bright one will not be distracted from rigorous academic pursuits by the polemical field of black studies. The material and intellectual rewards of learning lay elsewhere.*" I heard these messages too well. I never flouted them, not even in the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s. Consequently, after more than two decades of formal education in six states, I knew the Great Books, but virtually nothing about black history.

Educational psychologist Asa Hillard recently observed that, "[a]ny group that has no story is abandoned to others that do."⁵ For a group to have a story of its own, it must have story tellers and occasions for hearing the stories told. Abandoned to the stories of dominate cultures, I was grasping for tools of self-reclamation. Chance encounter with Higginbotham's rendition of my group's story revitalized a flagging commitment to historical self-understanding. *In the Matter of Color* sat on my shelf for five years before I read a word. Last year, when my copy of the multi-volume Schomburg Collection of Nineteenth Century Black Wo-

4. I wound up citing Higginbotham in my book. See Allen, *supra* note 3, at 193-94.

5. Leigh Jackson, *Toward a New Curriculum: Seminar Focuses on Effort to Make Studies Afro-Centric*, Wash. Post, Dec. 14, 1989, at J1, col. 3 (quoting Asa Hillard).

men Writers arrived, I knew I had to begin reading it at once.⁶

II. The Content

Judge Higginbotham first published *In the Matter of Color* in 1978. The book told the story of the black experience in the American colonial period, the English experience with slavery, and the impact of the American revolution on black bondage. The book sought to "demonstrate how the entire legal apparatus was used by those with the power to . . . establish a solid legal tradition for the absolute enslavement of blacks."⁷

One chapter in Higginbotham's study of the "pathology of the law" as an instrument of social control was an account of how the trustees of Georgia moved their jurisdiction backward into slavery.⁸ Georgia was chartered in 1732 as a British debtors' colony. (In the end, few debtors were actually permitted to go to Georgia.⁹) For fifteen years—1735 to 1750—Georgia was unique among the British colonies in America for its express ban on the importation of blacks. Georgia trustee James Oglethorpe explained the controversial prohibition that his high office compelled him to defend: "slavery . . . is against the Gospel, as well as the fundamental law of England."¹⁰

Higginbotham persuasively argued that, despite Oglethorpe's moral pronouncement, the Georgia slavery ban was amoral in origin. Moreover, Georgia was never a humane safe-haven for blacks. Oglethorpe and the other Trustees of the colony often winked at flagrant violations of the colony's anti-slavery prohibition.¹¹ Georgia courts implicitly condoned slavery by upholding legal claims premised on the existence of master-slave relationships.¹²

In 1750, the trustees of Georgia replaced the remarkable anti-

6. One of the first volumes I read in this important series, Lucy A. Delaney, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom*, in *Six Women's Slave Narratives* 9 (Henry Louis Gates ed. 1988), was helpful to my efforts to assess surrogate motherhood. See generally Anita L. Allen, *Surrogacy, Slavery, and the Ownership of Life*, 13 *Harv. J.L. & Pub. Pol'y* 139 (1990) (comparing legal predicament of surrogate mother Marybeth Whitehead to that of slave mother); see also Anita L. Allen, *The Black Surrogate Gestator*, *Harv. BlackLetter J.*, Spring 1991, at — (article forthcoming).

7. Higginbotham, *supra* note 1, at 14.

8. *Id.* at 12-14.

9. *Id.* at 221 ("Most of those whom the trustees ultimately financed were the 'poor people from the English Towns.'").

10. *Id.* at 216. (citing letter from James Oglethorpe to Granville Sharp, October 13, 1776, reprinted in *The African Repository* 104-05 (Washington, D.C. 1826) as cited by Ruth Scarborough, *Opposition to Slavery in Georgia* 62 (1933)).

11. *Id.* at 235-36.

12. *Id.* at 227-35.

slavery law of 1735 with a permissive enactment making it "lawful to import or bring Black Slaves or Negroes into the Province of Georgia in America to keep and use the same."¹³ Harsh Slave Codes subsequently adopted in 1755, 1765 and 1770, virtually eliminated meaningful freedom for most negroes, mulattoes and certain Indians.¹⁴ The price of attempting to escape to freedom was dear. Under "wanted dead or alive" recapture policies, authorities might pay white slave catchers as much as a pound sterling for the scalp and two ears of a runaway slave.¹⁵

III. A Context

Twenty years before I read *In the Matter of Color*, I took a course on Georgia history. In 1966, the army ordered my father to Korea for an eighteen month tour of duty. He was an enlisted man stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, where our family lived and where I attended the eighth grade in a military school. Wives and children were rarely permitted to accompany servicemen to Korea. Because both my parents were born and raised in Atlanta and still had large extended families there, my mother had hoped to make that city our home while my father was away. But no decent, affordable housing could be found in Atlanta for a black woman with six children. So we moved into a townhouse at the Atlanta Army Depot, a military reservation stockaded behind barbed-wire fences, tucked among several of Atlanta's more rural suburbs.¹⁶

Large, populous army installations, like the one at Fort Benning, have schools of their own open only to military dependents. The Atlanta Army Depot housed too few families to support a school. The government therefore provided "Depot" children free transportation to designated civilian public schools. The civilian schools welcomed the Depot children, for whose education they were reimbursed. Accustomed to multi-cultural military schools, I was apprehensive about attending the local civilian school with whom the military had struck a deal for me.¹⁷

13. *Id.* at 248-49.

14. *See id.* at 252-66.

15. *Id.* at 254.

16. The Atlanta Army Depot has been renamed. It is now called Fort Gillam.

17. I was apprehensive, but my older sister was furious. In 1964, as a high-school aged dependent living at Fort Benning, authorities initially forced her to attend a segregated black high school in Columbus, Georgia. After two years of culture shock and adjustment, the Muskogee County School authorities forced her to transfer to the white school that they wanted to "integrate" by admitting a prescribed quota of blacks, mainly from the army base and the middle-class black neighborhoods. Now, she faced spending her senior year friendless, living at the

Eleven years after *Brown v. Board of Education*,¹⁸ many Atlanta-area schools were still segregated on the basis of race. Forest Park Junior High School was a "white" school, all of whose teachers and administrators were white. I was the only black pupil in the eighth-grade, one of two black students in the school. During my first week at Forest Park, a classmate named Laura Peak, passed me a curious note praising me as "very brave in coming here." She did not understand that, far from brave, I was simply obedient.

For a time the white children at Forest Park Junior High ostracized me. I ate alone in the cafeteria. I weathered incidents of name-calling and stone throwing. At recess, boys drew "queer" circles around me in the Georgia clay with the heels of their shoes. But I was a star in the classroom and on the athletic field, a combination that soon won me friends. I grew to like the school in a way, but the high price I paid to fit in left me privately uneasy.

For example, I joined the others in a peculiar school-yard game. To initiate the nameless game, one student (whom I will call the "aggressor") approached another (whom I will call the "target") and demanded to know: "Are you a yankee or a rebel?" If the target answered "rebel," the aggressor expressed satisfaction and moved on to another target. If the target dared to answer "yankee," a chase ensued in which the aggressor attempted to catch the self-proclaimed "yankee." If the "yankee" was captured and shot with the aggressor's imaginary rifle, the aggressor was the victor. A "yankee" target could end the game at any time with a retraction—the magic words being, "I'm a rebel!"¹⁹ I never initiated the game—girls seldom did—but when I became a target, I faced a dilemma. *I'm a Negro. I'm for the yankees, aren't I? I was born in Washington state, virtually on the Canadian border. That is pretty far north! But, mama and daddy were born and raised in the south, in Georgia. Georgia is a rebel state. I've lived there most of my life. Doesn't that make me a rebel too?* Most of the time I answered "yankee" to the aggressor and sprinted away. But if I did not feel like running or getting shot, I answered "rebel!"

The Georgia history I was taught in 1966 from a state ap-

Depot and attending what she never ceased to regard bitterly as a white "hick" school in Jonesboro, Georgia.

18. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

19. Sometimes two or more aggressors and two or more targets played the game. Although it was mainly a boy's game, initiated by boy-aggressors, girls were often brought in as targets. Sometimes a rebel who chased down a yankee would engage in arm-twisting, wrestling or punching until the yankee swore that he or she was really a rebel. Rough versions of the game were generally restricted to situations in which both rebel and yankee were boys.

proved textbook in a required course at Forest Park Junior High was not the Georgia history that Judge Higginbotham related in *In the Matter of Color*. I was taught to honor James Oglethorpe as the first governor of Georgia, and to be glad about the invention of the cotton gin. In my course, the word "Negro" was uttered only in connection with a cursory presentation of slavery as an issue in the Civil War. In the mandatory eighth-grade Georgia history course I took, blacks existed but briefly in history, and then only as slaves. I recall vividly the day the teacher asked a classmate to read aloud the paragraph in the textbook in which slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation were mentioned in passing in connection with the Civil War. People stared at me. Everyone seemed embarrassed. I heard nervous giggles and a few snickers.

Outside of school, I picked up somewhere that a black man named George Washington Carver, after whom a lot of high schools were named, invented peanut butter, probably in Tuskegee, Alabama. Forest Park Junior High's version of Georgia history did not help me understand what I needed to know about black people, even black Georgians. I needed to know why, two years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination by places of public accommodation,²⁰ operators of the only skating rink in Forest Park denied entry to our racially-mixed Depot church youth group on both the "white only" and the "black only" days. I needed to know why, when my Atlanta cousins came to visit, they were so afraid to walk across our white neighbors' lawns. Why, each time we went to visit our great-grandmother Gran in Atlanta, it was *whispered* that she was a Cherokee Indian. Why, although I "liked" boys, all the boys I knew were strictly off limits — the boys at school because they were white and my cousins because they were my cousins. Why my mother, who often criticized black schools yet hoped one of her daughters would go to Spelman,²¹ insisted that we say "yes" or "no," never "yes, m'm" or "no, m'm." Finally, I needed to know why, in early childhood, my older sister had believed that only black people used the toilet.

IV. Good Citizenship

Several months ago I returned with pleasure to the deep south to one of the schools I attended, a newly-elected member of its board of trustees. During a break in the meetings, a fellow trustee turned to me and whispered excitedly, "Now that we have

20. See 42 U.S.C. § 2000(a) (1988) ("prohibition against discrimination or segregation in place of public accommodation").

21. Spelman College is a historically black women's college in Atlanta.

you here, what are you going to do to get us some black students?" As the day wore on, I got the impression that some faculty and administrators shared the trustee's hope for this same miracle from me: I was to produce black students even in the absence of minority scholarships, minority teachers, and other seemingly requisite resources.

Developing strategies for attracting more black students and faculty to the school was one of the goals I had set for my tenure on the board. So I did not much mind the trustee's question. But I was struck by its irony: *I am here, ready and willing to play the role you expect me to play. But I came here in spite of, not because of, my education at this school. This school, which still has an all-white faculty after all these years, taught me nothing about black history or culture. I was never even assigned a book by a black author. This school, which still has only six black students at a time, did nothing to foster my racial identity. This school, whose teachers stressed critical thinking and writing, never encouraged me to apply those skills to questions of race. So, where am I supposed to have developed the community spirit, the pride, the sense of special responsibility to my race the institution now expects of me, as a matter of course? Everyone here assumes that I have it. But from where, oh where, do they think it could have come?*

V. Afrocentric Education

"Afrocentric" education is potentially a source of fecund cultural self-understanding for black students at all levels. The term "Afrocentric" is neither new, nor limited in its application to ideals of formal education.²² As the term is typically employed, "Afrocentric" education denotes either:

- (1) education from an African-American point of view;²³

22. See, e.g., Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change 2* (1980) (describing a personal and political philosophy centered on African and African-American cultures). "The psychology of the black person without Afrocentricity has become a matter of great concern. Instead of looking out from his own center, the non-Afrocentric person operates in a manner that is negatively predictable. His images, symbols, lifestyles and manners are contradictory to himself and thereby destructive to his personal and collective growth and development. Unable to call upon the power of his ancestors, because he does not know them; without an ideology of his heritage, because he does not respect his own prophets; he is like an ant trying to move a large piece of garbage only to find that it always moves back on him." *Id.* at 4. For an analysis of Asante's and others views on "afrocentricity" see Lucius Outlaw, *Africology, Normative Theory* 24-25 (Apr. 1987) (unpublished essay prepared for the Symposium on "Africology" sponsored by the Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee).

23. Courtlind Milloy, *Looking at the World Through the Roots of Africa*, Wash. Post, Feb. 7, 1989, at B3, col. 2. ("Afrocentric means looking at the world from an

- (2) education about the history, contributions or cultural identity of African-Americans;²⁴ or,
- (3). aspects of both (1) and (2).

Like some critics of "Afrocentric" education, I am troubled by the confusion which sometimes surrounds policy-makers' imprecise and inconsistent uses of the expression "Afrocentric." I am even troubled by the word "Afrocentric" itself, which can sound as corny and out-of-date as "Afro-pick" and "Afro-puff."

However, call it what you will, educating blacks from and about black perspectives is a social imperative.²⁵ AfroCentric education need not be labelled as such, or limited to special courses or curricula so-labeled.²⁶ It may not require special holidays to commemorate heroes and heroines of the race. Teacher insensitivity to minority issues and perspectives is a minimum starting point. Creative educators must get to work from there.²⁷

Fear abounds that the ideal of "intellectual excellence" is going to the dogs.²⁸ The familiar "dogs" in question are the defenders of women's studies, black studies, gay studies, literary deconstruction, the "hermeneutics of suspicion," affirmative action, and so on. Accordingly, I conjecture that anything labelled "Afrocentric" education would automatically attract few supporters. I would be especially surprised to find support among the college and university faculty elites, whose scholarship in the humanities and social sciences is the ultimate basis of what is taught in teachers' colleges and what eventually filters down to school children. Scholars preaching that classic European texts

African point of view, incorporating the thinking, perceptions, priorities and values of African people into our education.") (quoting Fredrick Phillips, director of the progressive Life Center, a Washington-based psychiatric institute that focuses on the problems of young black boys and girls).

24. See, e.g., Franklyn G. Jenifer, *Afrocentricity Is No Cause for Alarm*, Wash. Post, Nov. 19, 1990, at A15, col. 4 (Howard University President Franklyn Jenifer states "[t]o say that a particular university should be more Afrocentric in its orientation is simply to say that a school system or university that is predominantly African-American should infuse its teaching and learning with cultural and intellectual emphases that reflect the identity and heritage of its dominate constituency.")

25. See Floretta Dukes Mckenzie, *Education Strategies for the '90s*, in *The State of Black America 1991*, at 100 (Janet Dewart ed. 1991).

26. *Id.* ("As a Howard University student in the '60s, I never took a course in '[African-] American History' or '[African-] American Literature' or anything with a similar title. But in each discipline within which I studied, my teachers made sure we students knew about the contributions [of] African- Americans.")

27. See Amy Hill Hearsh, *Educators Assess Black History Efforts*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 26, 1989, at 12WC 1, col. 1 (city ed.); see also Tracie Reddick, *D.C. Schools Fail in Duties, Official Says*, Wash. Times, Nov. 13, 1989, at B5, col. 2 (quoting Calvin Lockridge, member, Washington, D.C. Board of Education, "some of these black teachers are just as prejudiced and biased as everyone else.")

28. See generally John Searle, *The Storm Over the University*, *The N.Y. Rev. of Books*, Dec. 6, 1990, at 34, col. 1. (1990).

are works of "perfect art and unchanging truth" are bound to reject the notion that, for example, the all-white literary canon taught in junior and senior high schools in the 1950s is in any respect deficient for students today.²⁹

The reluctance to teach blacks about blacks is nothing new. One finds in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois two lines of concern. One line focuses on the Baconian recognition that knowledge is power, and therefore that black power is a threat to treasured forms of white hegemony.³⁰ The second line of concern is that black genius has yet to fully flower—with its implication that blacks have produced too little to provide the basis of an education about blacks from a black point of view.³¹ How does one respond to these concerns? My perspective on how to respond has been shaped by personal experiences suggesting that, when it comes to cultural self-understanding, even many academically successful, overachieving blacks are poorly educated. Failure to teach blacks the basis of cultural awareness may be contributing to the miserable performance by black school children in communities around the nation.

Without repeating past betrayals of the ideal of liberal democracy,³² educators cannot capitulate to the resistance to educating blacks about blacks, premised on fear of black power. Moreover, it is no longer possible to suppose that black writers, artists and scholars have produced no worthy ideas and artifacts. But, however one judges the quality or quantity of black genius, I discern in mainstream conceptions of "intellectual excellence" no logical basis for principled opposition to teaching black children a great deal more about blacks' in American society than schools have traditionally taught them.³³ Whatever blacks have produced, examples of this, in addition to examples of all else deemed important, is what children must know. Whether black children attend predominately black public schools, or private schools in which

29. See Alvin Kernan, *Literature: R.I.P.*, Wash. Post, Nov. 18, 1990, at C3, col. 1. (article tellingly subtitled, "TV, Academics and 'Isms' Have Subverted the Power of Print").

30. See W.E.B. DuBois *Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*, at 138-140 (Phillip S. Foner ed. 1970) ("Are you afraid to let them [the Negro] try?").

31. *Id.* at 78-79 ("the full, complete Negro message of the whole Negro race has not yet been given to the world") (outlining how Negro can become "a factor in the world's history").

32. Higginbotham, *supra* note 1, at 5-6 (Declaration of Independence and Constitution did not include liberation for blacks.)

33. An argument one hears is that there is simply no space in the crowded curriculum to add "black" materials without sacrificing some clearly more important "white" materials. If this were true, it would be an argument for extending the length of the school year, not for excluding non-traditional materials.

they are not the predominate racial group, they should not be isolated from the learning that allows them to find meaning and value in those aspects of themselves, their families and communities that they do not share with the dominate culture. The need for such learning follows black adolescents into college where they are expected to deepen their basic understandings of the world.

A study conducted in 1989 by members of the Carter G. Woodson Study Center found that a number of history, social science and language arts textbooks used by the Washington, D.C. public schools were "brutally harmful to the intellectual and emotional health of students."³⁴ It is mainly black children that the controversial textbooks place at risk, since about 92% of the students in Washington public schools are black.³⁵

Nearly half of all black American children grow up in poor families.³⁶ Poor teenagers are more than three times as likely than others to drop out of school.³⁷ They are four times as likely to have measurably lower educational skills.³⁸ About 98% of the drop-outs in D.C. public schools are black.³⁹ According to the Department of Education, about 20% of the black males in the public schools drop out.⁴⁰ Academic achievement among D.C. school children is low by many standard measures, and the incidence of violent crime in the schools is on the rise. Some experts attribute student violence, lack of self-esteem and a high drop-out rate to textbooks and teachers that critics have condemned as "terrible" and "racist."⁴¹

Washington's recently elected mayor, attorney Sharon Pratt Dixon, endorses the concept of "Afrocentric" education, as an approach to teaching and learning many believe would improve black student performance.⁴² Plans are underway to introduce Afrocentric curricula into the Washington public schools in 1992. The plan

34. Jonette Rose Barras, *Schools' 'Afro' Plan Gets Impetus*, Wash. Times, Aug. 17, 1990, at B1, col. 2.

35. Leigh Jackson, *Toward a New Curriculum: Seminar Focuses on Effort to Make Studies Afro-Centric*, Wash. Post, Dec. 14, 1990, at J1, col. 3.

36. See David H. Swinton, *The Economic Statue of African Americans: "Permanent" Poverty and Inequality*, in *The State of Black America 1991*, at 43 (Janet Dewart ed. 1991).

37. Mckenzie, *supra* note 25, at 96.

38. *Id.*

39. Jenice Armstrong, *Grant Furthers Afro-Centric Curriculum in D.C. Schools*, Dec. 21, 1989, Wash. Post, at J3, col. 1 (1988 statistics).

40. Reddick, *supra* note 27, at B5.

41. See Barras, *supra* note 34, at B1, col. 2; see also Shaun Hill, *Schools Urged to Adopt Afro-Centric Curriculum*, Wash. Post, Feb. 2, 1989, at J7, col. 1 (Operation Know Thyself, a D.C. group, seeks Afro-Centric curriculum in city's public schools to improve student self-esteem and self-understanding.)

42. Barras, *supra* note 34, at B1, col. 2; Armstrong, *supra* note 39, at J3, col. 1

to establish two African American "immersion" schools open to all Milwaukee public school children but targeted at the city's black males is one of the most dramatic examples of the faith some educators have in the potential of Afrocentric-education.⁴³

Without disputing that there is a distinct black male point of view from which troubled black males could be beneficially taught, the American Civil Liberties Union has threatened to bring a lawsuit to prevent the Board of Education of Milwaukee from creating a *de facto* segregated black male school in violation of the civil rights laws.⁴⁴ Joining legal skeptics are those who doubt that black student achievement can be significantly increased by teaching students from a black perspective or about the history, contributions and identity of African-Americans. *Brown v. Board of Education* psychologist Dr. Kenneth B. Clark predicts that the Milwaukee's African American "immersion" schools will become harmful "prep school[s] for correctional institutions."⁴⁵ Other pragmatic skeptics argue that black low achievement cannot be attributed to "Eurocentric" education alone. Black failure is overdetermined. Black children from the urban ghettos live in economically and morally impoverished worlds that drain motivation and ability. It is unlikely that Afrocentric modifications in text and pedagogy could produce high-achievers if all other social variables remained constant.

Indeed, the concept of Afrocentric education could be challenged on the controversial theory that the real source of blacks' problems is socioeconomic class, not African American race.⁴⁶ It is exceedingly doubtful that "Afrocentric" formal education is a panacea for the problems of black youth. If the Milwaukee African

(D.C. School Board received \$150,000 grant from Rockefeller Foundation for same in 1990.).

43. Kevin Johnson, *A Bold Experiment for Educating Black Males*, Oct. 11, 1990, USA Today, at 4D, col. 1.

The dropout rate for black males nationally was 6.2% in 1987, says the U.S. Department of Education. In Milwaukee, the rate was 19.3%[sic]. And while the grade point average for all students is 1.6—between C and D—for black male students, its 1.35. Blacks also get in trouble more than non-blacks: Last year, 17% of black students were suspended at least once. Just 7% of non-blacks were. The problem: Blacks—and—especially black males—are neglected, many educators say.

Id.

44. See Mireya Navarro, *Civil Liberties Union Likens Minority-School Plan to Segregation*, N.Y. Times, Jan. 13, 1991, at 20, col. 1 (Metropolitan Desk).

45. *Id.*

46. Cf. Benjamin DeMott, *The Delusory Lure of Race Politics*, Wash. Post, Nov. 18, 1990, at C7, col. 2 (myth of classlessness making us powerless to solve blacks' so-called "race" problems).

American "immersion" schools have special promise, it is because they are being designed to address a whole range of social variables contributing to black male underachievement. Educational innovation is risky. But so is educational conservatism. Where traditional methods have failed, new approaches are worth trying.

I disagree with those who declare that Afrocentric education is a hoax on black school children and Afrocentric, black studies, a hoax on their college and university counterparts.⁴⁷ Both controversial curricula represent serious efforts to work out approaches to teaching and learning that can provide blacks with cultural self-understanding and, through it, the motivation they need to meet the legitimate expectations of fellow citizens.

VI. Reclamation

Every young black needs to understand, why, in the words of Judge Higginbotham, their "branding . . . as inferior or less than human on the basis of color was not inevitable" and is not inevitable.⁴⁸ So long as skeptical perspectives hold sway among local and ivory-tower educators, we should not be surprised to find that black teens abandon high school, and black college students abandon African American studies programs. Respected educators are virtually advising them to do it, implying that schooling, if relevant to blacks, is a waste of time.⁴⁹ To the vulnerable ears of the least advantaged, the messages of traditionalists in education sound especially credible. For these future citizens, there is little hope for a Higginbotham to read; little hope for an ability to read well; no second chances for history-informed self-understanding.

47. See generally Kernan, *supra* note 29, at C3, col. 1; Searle, *supra* note 28, at 34, col. 1.

48. Higginbotham, *supra* note 1, at 390.

49. See Mark I. Pinsky, *Black Students at (University of California at Irvine) King Forum Told Not to Forget Their Roots*, L. A. Times, pt. 2, at 1, col. 3 (Orange County ed).