

Michael Hines

*A Worthy Piece of Work: The Untold Story of Madeline Morgan and the Fight for Black History in Schools*

Boston: Beacon Press, 2022. 218 pp.

In a work that reveals as much about the present as it does the past, Michael Hines writes the first biography of noted educator Madeline Morgan. Morgan gained far-reaching acclaim during World War II for producing Chicago's first officially adopted Black history curriculum. The book not only recounts Morgan's success in disseminating Black history, but also her skillful navigation of local and national politics to ensure that her unprecedented curriculum was instituted.

Living in an age of powerful search engines can make it easy to lose sight of how rare materials featuring African Americans were in the 1940s. Most of *A Worthy Piece of Work* is set during this turbulent period full of wartime anxieties and heightened racial tensions. African Americans seeking to defeat the Axis Powers abroad and racism at home threatened attempts to galvanize the nation behind the war effort. Fearing increased Black militancy, Chicago authorities turned to schools to promote racial tolerance, leading to Morgan's pathbreaking curriculum.

Hines gives Morgan her rightful place as a leader of the "early black history movement" which historian Pero Dagbovie has conceptualized. This struggle saw the "promotion and preservation" (xi) of accurate materials depicting African Americans as key to the ongoing freedom struggle. Its most well-known representatives were men such as Carter G. Woodson, who founded what became Black History Month. However, the biography shows that legions of Black women educators such as Stratton played equally important roles in cultivating an alternative historical consciousness in American society. The early chapters show that Morgan was equally comfortable in progressive educational circles, professional organizations, and the institutions of Chicago's Black Renaissance. This rich landscape in Chicago proved crucial in Morgan's promotion of Black history.

Morgan's most known work, *Supplementary Materials for the Course of Instruction in Social Studies* was published in 1942 and catapulted her into a nationally recognized authority on culturally relevant pedagogy. A series of violent racial conflicts in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Detroit only intensified its appeal. While political leaders saw the curriculum as key to preventing further bloodshed in the streets, its impact was most deeply felt in classrooms. The book shows how Morgan's work helped students of all races gain a greater appreciation of Black history and new opportunities to question America's racial hierarchy.

Yet this watershed moment was ephemeral, as a virulent backlash followed World War II. Hines effectively draws on trailblazing critical race scholar Derrick Bell's theory of "interest convergence" to illustrate the abrupt fraying of wartime coalitions that helped account for the popularity of *Supplementary Units*. This reversal of fortunes was typified by the failure of the Illinois House of Representatives to mandate Morgan's curriculum in 1945. Lacking the protection of an official endorsement,

support for *Supplementary Units* withered in the face of a resurgent conservatism during the early stages of the Cold War.

There is much to admire about *Worthy Piece of Work*. It meticulously uses archival sources and oral histories to uncover the creative strategies African Americans devised to counter racist curricula. The book reminds us of Black women teachers' political acumen and the many hats they often wear. Morgan was not only an instructor, but also an educational creative and thought leader. Hines makes it clear that he writes an "educational biography" (xiv) and thus more intimate aspects of Morgan's life are not included. This may be due not only to the available source base but also Black women's "culture of dissemblance," which shielded the more private aspects of their lives from public view.<sup>3</sup>

The book also makes clear parallels to our current historical moment where curricula centring marginalized people are under constant attack. It forces us to consider if the power structure is even concerned with uncovering historical truths, particularly if they threaten existing systems of privilege. We are reminded that windows of opportunity have been regrettably short, particularly when compared to periods of backlash. Yet despite these challenges, Morgan's pioneering efforts are not in vain. We see traces of her imprint in the flowering of Black studies programs in the 1960s and 1970s and even our current efforts to decolonize the curriculum. It is a telling commentary of American democracy, that this work is just as deserving of our efforts as it was in Morgan's day.

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Jack Schneider and Ethan L. Hutt

*Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning  
(But Don't Have To)*

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Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023, 296 pages

Schneider and Hutt's *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (But Don't Have To)* provides an overview of three central assessment "technologies"—grades, tests, and student records—and the manner in which they shape the American educational system in K–12 and post-secondary contexts. The book examines their function as forms of motivation, communication, and synchronization, detailing central problems and challenges. The narrative offered in this text is both measured and complex: "crucial interventions" can provide solutions while at the same time presenting additional challenges (111). While assessment in American classrooms may, indeed, be broken, "the key to reform," Schneider and

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3 Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912.