PRAXIS OF VINDICATIONIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Subject Area / Grade Level: AP U.S. History / AP African-American Studies (11-12th grade), College Level “Introduction to African-American Studies Course.”

African-American cultural identity has been historically negotiated and recreated under the constraints of Euro-American domination. 1 A most potent element often employed as resistance to hegemony and struggle for African American cultural autonomy (i.e. liberation) was the agency of vindicationist historiography. This endeavor was devoted to the critique, reinterpretation and dissemination of African history in direct response to changing material conditions. It has therefore served as a means of preservation, affirmation and/or reclamation of cultural identity. Furthermore, it has constituted an intellectual praxis geared toward countering Eurocentric intellectual and political hegemony. Considering vindicationist historiography is defined simply as the critical examination of how history (of Africa) has been researched and written with the aim of correcting and/or redeeming it from slander, misinterpretation and defamation, it is important to underscore that it was employed to give meaning to and/or impact African-Americans’ political, social and cultural aspirations.2

The formal articulation of vindicationist historiography in the 20th century was pioneered by the “Father of Black History”, Dr. Carter G. Woodson. Woodson became the co-founder of the Association for the Advancement of Negro Life and History in 1915, and subsequently established The Negro Journal a year later. They both served as institutions that sought “to promote, research, preserve, and disseminate information about Black life, history and culture to the global community.”3 Woodson himself would stress a most profound thesis directly related to the praxis of vindicationist historiography in The Miseducation of the Negro (1933), as he wrote, “When you control a man’s thinking, you don’t have to worry about his actions.” Accordingly, Woodson elucidated a critical view of an American educational system that “inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the

2 Murrell, African-Centered, 138, refers to this as narrative knowledge.
3 “Carter G. Woodson” www.asalh.org/woodsonbiosketch.html
thought that he is everything…..(while), depresses and crushes, at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro.” Woodson delineated the central feature in this “educational process” to be the omission and/or distortion of “Negro History.” It was this factor that Woodson believed subjugated the Negro’s intellectual sphere and consequently encapsulated his/her social, psychological and political aspirations. Dr. Woodson thus argued for a re-examination and critique of “Eurocentric” historical theories and methodologies, and a re-writing of history that would engage the social, economic and political lives of African people. In sum, Woodson embodied an organic agency of historiography that “recovered” the African-American’s ‘historical narrative’ by centering him/her as an active contributor to all spheres of world civilization. This praxis would thus counter European hegemony through promoting a shared cultural heritage, collective identity and racial self determination geared toward material empowerment.4

Though Woodson may have pioneered the formalization of vindicationist historiography in the 20th century, West African origins of this phenomenon can be exhibited through the “oral poetics” of the “griot,” or “imbongi.”5 When interpreting this agency through an ‘indigenous’ lens, the “griot” is interpreted as the continuity between the African past and present with respect to the fluid, ever changing contemporary politico-cultural context.6 In other words, the “griot” offered an analytical assessment of indigenous, or historical cosmology to propagate a particular narrative aimed at impacting material reality. Accordingly, the griot served as mediator, educator, mentor and critic of an African authority and those under his authority as he represented the organic bridge between (or perhaps duality of) the past and present - the metaphysical and the material. This indigenous agency of vindicationist historiography is vividly illustrated in Niani’s Sundiata An Epic of Old Mali. This oral history not only highlights the centrality of the griot being responsible for the rise of Sundiata and establishment of the Malian empire, but is also an analytical synthesis of successive historical perspectives into a

6 See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodology: Research and Indigenous Peoples, (New York, NY: Zed Books, Ltd., 1999), which examines the inadequacy of Western research which interprets indigenous phenomena through a colonial lens.
critical narrative that is aimed at propagating an affirmation of heritage, pride and political aspirations for the contemporary Mandinka people in particular, and West Africans in general.

As the indigenous peoples of Africa were dispersed throughout the Americas via the Atlantic Slave Trade and subjected to an unprecedented system of racialized slavery, vindicationist historiography was a critical agency in the politico-cultural reclamation, affirmation and innovation of African people. It is imperative here to note that these enslaved persons descended from a diverse multitude of West and West Central African peoples, whose indigenous identities were shaped by respective histories and cosmologies (as personified in the griot). Considering they were displaced and subjugated within “White” Euro-American hegemony, a process of ‘racialization’ occurred (i.e. slave culture). Consequently, these persons of African descent were psychologically forced to contend with their new material conditions. Instead of assimilating the racist/cultural ethos of the oppressor however these subjugated persons maintained cultural, religious, and political agency in their respective communities. This was done by acculturating, propagating and consolidating politico-cultural identities that may have been actual retentions or hybrids from indigenous African ethnic groups. However, the defining quality is that these identities were based on an African historical narrative that was analytically synthesized in such to resist and/or counter European political and cultural hegemony.

The praxis of vindicationist historiography through which (indigenous) African historical narratives were propagated in the New World produced some of the most innovative, resilient and revolutionary dynamics within the African-American experience. This can be vividly illustrated through the examination of such New World

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African identities as the Bambara, Coromantee, Ibo, Lucumi, and others. These ‘African’ identities reveal a distinct historiographical and cosmological critique of one’s subjugated condition. Moreover, an innovative Pan-African agenda was established through the propagation of a “shared history of oppression at the hands of Europeans” and the obligation to engage in “common uplift.” Nevertheless, these identities were shaped through a critical analysis (and perhaps synthesis) of indigenous history that resulted in an obligation to re-establish a sense of autonomy through resisting European hegemony. Slave conspiracies and insurrections by many of the above as well as those of the more well known Boukman and Toussaint L’Overture and Denmark Vesey reveal strong tendencies of historiography out of which a revolutionary Pan-African agenda was realized.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Euro-centric historiography, social sciences, and religion were utilized to transmit the universality of an European racial and cultural ‘ethos’. Consequently, “Africa” and its descendants (Negro race) were portrayed as ‘ahistorical,’ ‘illiterate,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘backward,’ ‘pagan,’ ‘heathen’, ‘cursed’, and ‘evil’ as a justification for the continued subjugation, enslavement and colonization of African people. Meanwhile, many African populations in the Americas became self-reproducing and thereby creolized as

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14 Continental and Diasporic Africans had much more contact with and familiarity of Great Britain’s language, education, technology, religious.. etc. due to the commercial dominance of the British empire during this time period.


16 Much of the field of anthropology developed through the misinterpretation of African culture; see A.B. Ellis, *The Ewe –Speaking People of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Languages*. (London, England: 1890). Though some of these assessments have been coined “pseudo-scientific,” many of the theories are still propagated, or ingrained via Western scholarship —i.e. “modernist approach.” According to Dr. W. Rucker this notion of cultural inferiority also had analogues in the assumptions that went along with the education and the creation of schools, for newly freed enslaved African Americans in the years following the Civil War. Review German philosopher Hegel’s statement regarding African intellectual inferiority quoted in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983). 41. Social Darwinism would be used in the latter part of the 19th century to reinforce the myth of African inferiority and rationale for European colonization of Africa: Hollis Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1834-1912*. (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.
indigenous ‘ethnic’ identification began to evolve into a ‘race’ based identity. These dynamics, along with manumissions that occurred during the Revolutionary era (18th century), resulted in the emergence of a small but significant “Free Black” population which further engaged in the praxis of vindicationist historiography.

Realizing they were still subjugated by Euro-North American hegemony, these marginally ‘free’ as well as enslaved Blacks viewed and pursued Western education (i.e. literacy) as a means of opposition to oppression. Accordingly, they were met with the Enlightenment ideals of ‘independence,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘liberty,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘equality’, while they simultaneously developed a critical conscious of their racially marginalized caste / status. As these processes prompted an embrace of these ideals, racial identification and solidarity were stressed to promote the empowerment of the race locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Considering the race’s ancestral homeland, “Africa” was viewed as the source of their marginality because it was portrayed as devoid of civilization, ‘ahistorical’ and ‘primitive’, “free Blacks’ began to look for evidence to counter these notions.

Through studying the ancient Graeco-Roman writings of Herodotus, Pliney, Diodorus and others, they found that Africa’s past was once revered as the source of civilization. The King James Version of the Bible also proved to be a most important source of inspiration through which ‘free Blacks’ began to view themselves as key agents in a Providential Design involving Africa’s redemption. Resiliently, ‘free Africans,’ as they began proclaiming themselves, established an ideological platform that rationalized European/Euro-North American hegemony with respect to

17 Douglas Chambers, Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 2005), 15-17; discusses how the ethnic identity of Igbo was unknown until Africans came into contact with Europeans. As they were transported and dislocated from their homeland they were further creolized via three levels: Eboe; Guinea; African. By nineteenth century, the vast majority of Africans in the Western hemisphere had become racialized. An important contribution to the historiography of African-American Studies has been such inquiries that highlight such “Negro Slave” forms of resistance within the New World as Nat Turner’s Rebellion, Cinque Revolt aboard the Amistad, Denmark Vesey’s Conspiracy, Toussaint L’Overture’s Haitian Revolution, and others. Perhaps, the most ubiquitous though marginalized element in this historiography however may be inquiries that highlight the indigenous African cultural retentions, hybridizations and affirmations that were utilized as agencies in the New World to establish and/or maintain political, cultural and religious autonomy the enslaved. It is this phenomena that acknowledges the cultural complexities and sophistication of the captives who became African-American which counters the essentialized view of the ahistorical/accultural Negro slave. It is this phenomena that further constitutes the birth of perhaps the most innovative and revolutionary historical process that came to be known as Pan-Africanism.


their new status and life purpose. Thus, vindicationist historiography of Africa and the Diaspora ensued in such a manner that “Africanity”, or African identification was promoted to foster the material uplift of the race.20

The scholar/activists who employed vindicationist historiography in their intellectual and organizational endeavors included such “race men” as David Walker, Prince Hall, Henry Highland Garnett, Alexander Crummell and E.W. Blyden. Accordingly, all devoted their intellectual and material resources toward countering European hegemony through the vindication, reclamation, and promotion of African historiography and by extension its Diaspora. Subsequently, organizations with distinct African identification were founded beginning in the late 1700s, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, A.M.E. Zion Church, African Free Schools, Abyssinian Baptist Church, African Orthodox Church, Free African Society, African Brotherhood, African Lodge, and American Negro Academy. These institutions should thus be viewed as material manifestations of vindicationist historiography as they were all designed to contribute to the elevation of the race.

In sum, the praxis of vindicationist historiography within the African-American experience demonstrated the duality of scholarship and activism that was mandated by a quest for intellectual and material liberation. This endeavor served as an organic agency in affirming, reclaiming and propagating a heritage, identity and purpose within the African-American experience. As it evolved, it would fuel Black Nationalist, Pan-Africanist, as well as African independence movements. Furthermore, it established the theoretical framework for scholarship devoted to Africa and the Diaspora. It is in this vein that this unit on Praxis of Vindicationist Historiography and the African American Experience is established in which the ultimate objective is for students

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20 A variety of conceptualizations concerning identity were realized among the marginalized persons of African descent giving way to various liberational strategies and goals (i.e. Negro, Colored, Black, Afro-American, etc.) This is further complicated by the fact that the “white” Euro-American culture which dominated Africans rested on very ambiguous origins: Harold Cruise, The Crises of the Negro Intellectual, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1967). See ideological conflicts over identity and political strategy in Leslie M. Alexander, African Or American?: Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1787-1861. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
to develop a critical lens by which to examine the historiography of the World, in general and Africa, in particular. Accordingly, students will recover a historical narrative that gives way to an empowered view of cultural identity and self determination.
LESSON I: Introduction to Vindicationist Historiography and the African-American Experience:

Key Concepts: perspective, history, propaganda

Supplemental Concepts: analyze, affirmation, scholarship, activism, vindicationist historiography

Objectives: Students will: 1.) discern the purpose of “Black History”; 2) develop critical thinking skills directly enhancing their view of “self” through African-American historiography; 3.) acknowledge education as a historical and political process that directly impacts one’s life; 4.) analyze how perspective impacts the interpretation of the past as the present; 5.) analyze how vindicationist historiography has been a source of political and cultural affirmation as well as an organic connection between scholarship and activism within the African-American experience.

Activities:

✓ Students will be introduced to key concepts by providing a conventional definition as well as critical writing exercises to connect concepts to social, cultural and/or racial realities as follows:

**Perspective** – a mental view, the state of one’s ideas or the facts known to one.

What perspective do you have of your community? Race?

**History** – branch of knowledge dealing with the past, a continuous narrative of past events as relating to a particular people.

What do you learn about your community or race in “history”?

**Propaganda** – information disseminated to shape one’s mind, opinions and beliefs.

Is the history we learn “truth”? Does this history affect the way you see your race today? Does it affect what members of the race due today?

✓ Students will be given a list of quotations on history from notable African Americans and choose three on which they will reflect and write on how this perspective of history may impact their view on their race.

The quotations are as follows:

- History is a people’s memory and without a memory man is demoted to the level of the lower animals.
  Malcolm X (1965)

- We are not makers of history, we are made by history.
  Dr. Martin Luther King, 1963.

- The historian is the prophet looking backward.
Dr. Carter G. Woodson, 1935
- All great people glorify their history and look back upon their early attainments with a spiritual vision.
  Kelly Miller, 1906

-Western man wrote his ‘His’ story as if it were the history of the entire human race.
  John Killens, 1964

-Rob a people of their sense of history and it takes away their hope.
  Wyatt T. Walker, 1967

-American history is a myth and can only be accepted when read with blinders that block out the facts.

-History is written by the winners.
  Alex Haley, 1972.

✓ As students share their written responses with class, teacher will introduce and integrate supplemental concepts listed above.

✓ Dr. Carter G. Woodson’s quote from The Miseducation of the Negro, “when you control a man’s thinking, you don’t have to worry about his actions,” will be presented in which students will respond to the following two questions:
  o How can the perspective of history impact the actions of people?
  o How can historiography help people take control of their history?

✓ After students read two brief excepts on Dr. Woodson and The Origins of Black History Month, they will respond to the following question:
  o What was Dr. Woodson’s goal for Black History? (vindicationist historiography)
  o How were connections between Black History (scholarship) and the struggle for equality (activism) combined in Black History?

✓ Students will now be formally introduced to the concept of vindicationist historiography -defined as the study of how history has been researched and written with the objective of correcting, redeeming, or countering it from slander or defamation.
Evaluation:

✓ Students will choose one of the African-Americans from the quotes above, research his/her biography then producing a two page essay that: a. connects the quote concerning history to the person’s life struggle and/or contribution and; b. develop their own motto for history and how it establishes direction for their future.

✓ Rubric will be as follows:

1. (not proficient) 2 (proficient) 3 (exemplary)

Content / Ideas

Part A – analysis of quote and life struggle

Part B- development of personal motto and demonstration of their understanding of key concepts (vindicationist historiography, perspective and propaganda) with respect to how motto shapes identity/purpose.

Conventions

(capitalization, grammar, spelling, format)

Sources:
“Carter G. Woodson” www.asalh.org/woodsonbiosketch.html
“The History of Black History Month” www.asalh.org/blackhistorymonthorgins.html
www.dictionary.com
LESSON II: The Griot, Oral Tradition, and Vindicationist Historiography.

Key Concepts: griot, oral history, cultural identity, heritage

Objectives: Students will: 1.) examine West African oral history within the context of vindicationist historiography; 2.) compare/contrast the oral and written forms of communication; 3.) analyze the relationship between heritage (perspectives of history), cultural identity and life purpose; and 4.) generate an authentic historiography of their own via oral testimony and evaluate its impact on goals and aspirations.

Activities:

✓ Study questions to be engaged as students read Niani Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali are as follows:

1. Why is the genealogy of Sundiata given in the beginning of the text?
2. What impact does knowing the line of ancestry and their accomplishments have on a Sundiata’s life?
3. How did the griot use history to facilitate Sundiata’s rise to power and establishment of the Malian empire?
4. What are the numerous roles of the griot within the story.
5. How would the story had been different if Sundiata’s griot would have been killed?
6. What is the value of oral history as opposed to written history? (according to Niani)
7. Why did the author, a modern griot, reduce this oral history to writing? How is this an exercise in vindicationist historiography?

✓ After study questions are thoroughly discussed from the students’ respective frameworks, they will be assigned to interview one of their eldest relatives. Before this takes place students should briefly write down what they know about the relative they are interviewing, why they chose them and what impact the relative had/has on their lives. Students should then interview the relative with respect to the following guiding question.
Discribe the most significant events during your life as a child, adolescent and adult that shaped who you are today. Students are to take notes from the interviewees’ responses. Afterwards they should write up the response.

✔ Students are now to reflect on the testimonies and on the following:

1. What did you think was most important within the oral testimony they shared with you?
2. What do you think is least significant?
3. If you were to write a biographical sketch on this person, what would you be sure to include?
4. What would you omit if you had a limitation of time and/or space?
5. If you wanted to promote a more positive portrayal of your relative, what parts of the testimony would you emphasize?
6. Are there any parts of the testimony that you would omit to project a more positive portrayal?

EVALUATION

✔ Students are now to produce an essay addressing the following:

- A. How is the role of the griot and his agency of oral history for Sundiata, similar / dissimilar to your relative’s oral testimony to you?
- B. What happens to the historical narrative when it is written down?
- C. How does this activity demonstrate the impact that history and historiography have on the contemporary perspective and overall purpose of life?

Rubric: 1 (not proficient) 2 (proficient) 3 (exemplary)

Content / Ideas

Addressing each part of questions incorporating Niani and interview. 1 2 3
Integration of lesson’s key concepts within answer 1 2 3

Conventions

(capitalization, grammar, spelling, format) 1 2 3

SOURCE:
LESSON III: Vindicationist Historiography and African Culture in the New World

KEY CONCEPTS: hegemony, chattel slavery, insurrection, conspiracy, cultural retention, African Diaspora.

OBJECTIVES: Students will: 1.) demonstrate that “culture is a historical reality” and the more one knows of their history, the more they become empowered. 2) analyze how one’s perspective of history can impact identity and life purpose; and 3.) examine vindicationist historiography as the source of African cultural retentions, intra-African acculturation/synthesis, as well as intellectual, social and political agency against European hegemony.

ACTIVITIES:

✓ Students will be asked to reflect on one aspect of culture: religion, music, art, dance, language, food.

✓ Students will write a paragraph on how they view this element within their own culture and determine whether it is distinct or the same as mainstream culture.

✓ Students will explain why this particular element viewed as the same or different.

✓ Students will review the meaning of all key concepts and demographic charts itemizing the West African and West Central African regions and ethnic/cultural impacted by the Atlantic Slave Trade.

✓ Students will read excerpts of Herskovits. The Myth of the Negro Past detailing how African-Americans have specific African cultural retentions in their secular, religious and artistic spheres. A brief discussion on the above cultural elements will take place discerning the African retentions within each.

✓ Students will now respond to how this historical information impacts their view of the respective cultural element and how it may impact their future engagement of it.

✓ Students will be given excerpts from the following literature detailing African retentions, resistance and rebellions in America that all propagated an “African” indigenous frame of reference to establish a sense of politico-cultural identity and autonomy.
• The Lucumi and Santeria in Puerto Rico (Brandon, 1993)
• Bambara and rice production in Colonial Louisiana (Hall, 1992)
• Creation of Ibo identity in Virginia (Northup, 2000)
• Coromantee and political revolt (Thornton, 2000)
• African Muslims and practice of Islamic pillars in North America (Diouf, 1998)

✓ Students will read each excerpt and discern how the identity of the African people within the oppressed environment was essential to the practice.

EVALUATION:

✓ Students will write an essay that addresses the following

  o Examine two examples from the above and explain how the historical views of enslaved Africans impacted their cultural and/or political identity and practices within European hegemony.
  o Describe one of your own cultural practices that you now know is an African cultural retention and how it shapes your identity.

Rubric: 1 (not proficient) 2 (proficient) 3 (exemplary)

Content / Ideas
Addressing each part of questions 1 2 3
Integration of lesson’s key concepts within answer 1 2 3

Conventions
(capitalization, grammar, spelling, format) 1 2 3

SOURCES:
Cultural/linguistic map of Africa.
Michael Gomez. Exchanging Our Country Marks
Melville J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past,
David Northup, Igbo and Myth Igbos: Culture and Ethnicity in the Atlantic World, 1600-1850,” Slavery and Abolition, 21 (2000), 1-20
LESSON IV. : Edward Wilmot Blyden, Vindicationist Historiography and Africanaity

**Key Concepts:** Pseudo-scientific theories, Social Darwinism, African Diaspora, vindicationist historiography, praxis, Black Nationalism.

**Objectives:** Students will 1.) examine historical works of E.W. Blyden exemplifying vindicationist historiography of Africa during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century; 2.) analyze how vindicationist historiography was an intellectual and material agency geared toward racial vindication from European hegemony; and 3.) analyze how vindicationist historiography was tied to the propagation of “African” identity and praxis for racial liberation within the African American experience.

**Activities:**

- Students will be asked the following opening questions;
  - How are inner – city (African-American) youth viewed or stereotyped by mainstream America?
  - What historical or cultural elements of this population are often used to justify this mainstream view (stereotype) of Black youth?
  - How does the mainstream’s view / stereotype of Black youth and their culture impact the way Black youth view themselves and the way Black youth behave?

- Students will be guided in a discussion regarding how views regarding race have their origin in antebellum America. A brief lecture/discussion on late 18th-19th century African-American history highlighting the dynamics of European “white” hegemony as endorsed through Social Darwinism, pseudo-scientific racial theories (i.e. phrenology) as well as Anglo versions of Christianity will ensue. These three areas will be expounded on to illustrate how the Anglo version of African historiography conceptualized Africa and its people (i.e. the Negro race) as “primitive”, “ahistorical”, “cursed”, and “inferior,” with the intended objective of justifying the racial subjugation, enslavement and colonization of African people.
Students will be given a brief biography on Edward Wilmot Blyden and be assigned the following articles by Blyden:

- Article I -- “The Negro in Ancient History” (1869)
- Article II -- “A Vindication of the African Race” (1857)
- Article III – “Christianity and the Negro Race” (1876)
- Article IV -- “Ethiopia Stretching forth her hands unto God, or Africa’s Service to the World,” in Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race.

Students will read each piece and document at least three counter arguments for each myth from the respective articles:

- Article I - Myth I. “Africa has no history”
- Article II – Myth II. “African people are cultural, intellectual and/or physiologically inferior”
- Article III – Myth III. “African people are cursed to be slaves”
- Article IV – Myth IV. “Africa and its race have no future”

Evaluation:

Students will be required to write an essay detailing how they may “vindicate” or “promote” themselves with respect to the “mainstream’s” view of African-American youth. The essay must challenge (and/or revise) the historical or cultural elements they initially identified as justification for the mainstream’s view and reference Blyden to substantiate their points. It is hoped students will be inspired to engage in vindicationist historiography as well as praxis of empowerment in all aspects of their cultural, educational, social, and political lives.

Rubric: 1 (not proficient) 2 (proficient) 3 (exemplary)

Content / Ideas

- Addressing each part of question 1 2 3
- Integration of lesson’s key concepts and Blyden references throughout 1 2 3

Conventions

(capitalization, grammar, spelling, format) 1 2 3

Sources:


---------------------------, “Ethiopia Stretching forth her hands unto God, or Africa’s Service to the World,” in Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race.

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[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)