Systemic Emasculation: A History of American Institutional Affects on Black Male Dysfunction 1700 -1950

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Final Project
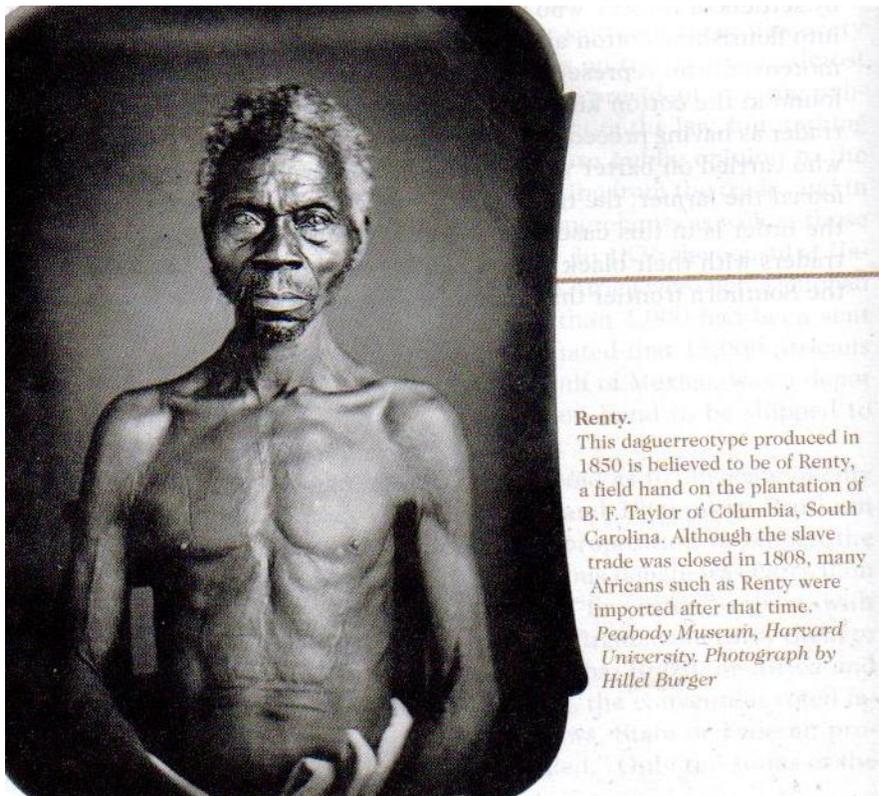
Overview:

The physical mistreatment and subjugation of the Negro people during slavery and a different but equally malicious form of institutional racism in the decades since their emancipation have systemically distorted the psychology of black males and the people in general. Such that, as stated by Carter G. Woodson in *The Mis-Education of the Negro,* "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary." (ix) This unit is designed for high school juniors and seniors in an African American Studies course and explores the nature of the institutionalized structures, policies, agendas and practices from 1700 -1950 which conspired against black males and effectively undermined black manhood. The nature of these systemic processes will be analyzed within their historical context and the psychological and psychiatric implications unveiled to facilitate a rich and deep understanding of the scope, sequence and consequences of the educational malpractice, broadly defined, experienced by African males from the Atlantic Slave Trade to the Post-Reconstruction/Pre-Civil Rights era. Students will be expected to identify, evaluate and explain relevant facts in the experience of black males through their historical journey to and through America which have contributed to historical and current black male dysfunction.

The Atlantic Slave Trade and Manhood:

The Atlantic Slave Trade or Middle Passage as it is sometimes called began the process of emasculation for African males in route to America. Daniel P. Black, in his book, *Dismantling Black Manhood*, describes it as, "the slave's initiation into a systematic degradation designed to strip away his humanity and make him ready for the seller's block." (43) This 'commoditization', as it is referred to by Stephanie Smallwood in her work *Saltwater Slavery,* was an acute blow to both his sense of self and manhood for the African male, who prided himself on being able to protect and defend his wife and family. No longer able to function according to his developed self concept he became psychologically bereft and awash in a sea of shifting identity. If he could no longer function as a man, then how should he to function and, more importantly, what was he? So intense was this psychological

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shift as to induce deep depression and psychosis, sometimes leading to death. Some men threw themselves from

ships drowning themselves in the salt waters of the Atlantic sea before they could be recovered by slavers and

others – mysteriously - were said to "will themselves dead". Black states that, "Men who once stood in defense of

their mother's and father's legacy, now, under extreme duress, simply sat down and died. They saw little reason

to live, for their manhood had been rendered dysfunctional." (49) Under the circumstances, certainly this type of

despondency is plausible.

Renty.
This daguerreotype produced in 1850 is believed to be of Renty, a field hand on the plantation of B. F. Taylor of Columbia, South Carolina. Although the slave trade was closed in 1808, many Africans such as Renty were imported after that time.
Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger

Hence, if the African male was no longer able to rely on his own virility and ability to provide and protect,

upon whom was he to rely. As a matter of design "he could now look to none but his master, the one to whom the

system had committed his entire being: the man upon whose will depended his food, his shelter, his sexual

connections, whatever more 'success' was possible within the system, his very security – in short, everything." (59)

This shift in locus of control from internal to external, self to master, is particularly significant as it relates to black

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male dysfunction because the concept of manhood, a priori, implies self sufficiency or the ability to care and provide for oneself. Thus, under the condition of slavery the black male became amorphous – having the physical features and physiological functions of a man but denied access to the role which fulfills the concept.

As damaging as the this process was to African males , white males rationalized its justification through the platform of Manifest Destiny which posited that it was the purpose of the white race to rule and therefore "the enslavement of blacks was essential to the freedom of whites." (Franklin 127) This notion was supported theologically, referencing the curse issued by Noah on the descendents of Ham to become servants of servants, but also psychologically. Alexander Thomas, in his book *Racism and Psychiatry*, asserts "The black man, it was repeatedly claimed, was uniquely fitted for bondage by his primitive psychological organization. For him, mental health was contentment with his subservient lot, while protest was an infallible symptom of derangement." (2) Hence, both religion and science conspired against the black male in his subjugation which made his condition not only physically present but also psychologically relevant.

The Enslaved Black Male and Manhood:

The Black male in slavery was no more able to cultivate a sense of self and manhood than he was during the Middle Passage. "Everywhere that [he] turned he met a law, institution, ideology, or individual that functioned to remind him of his inferiority, disallowing him agency, autonomy, or respect." (Black 63) The black males' dependence on his white master for every facet of his existence led to the iconic perception of slave owners as "The Man." Furthermore, slave codes, in essence expressing the view that "slaves are not people but property" (Franklin 140) served to reinforce that black males perception that he was indeed no longer a man but something else, lacking the autonomy, agency or nature to produce a self sustaining lifestyle.
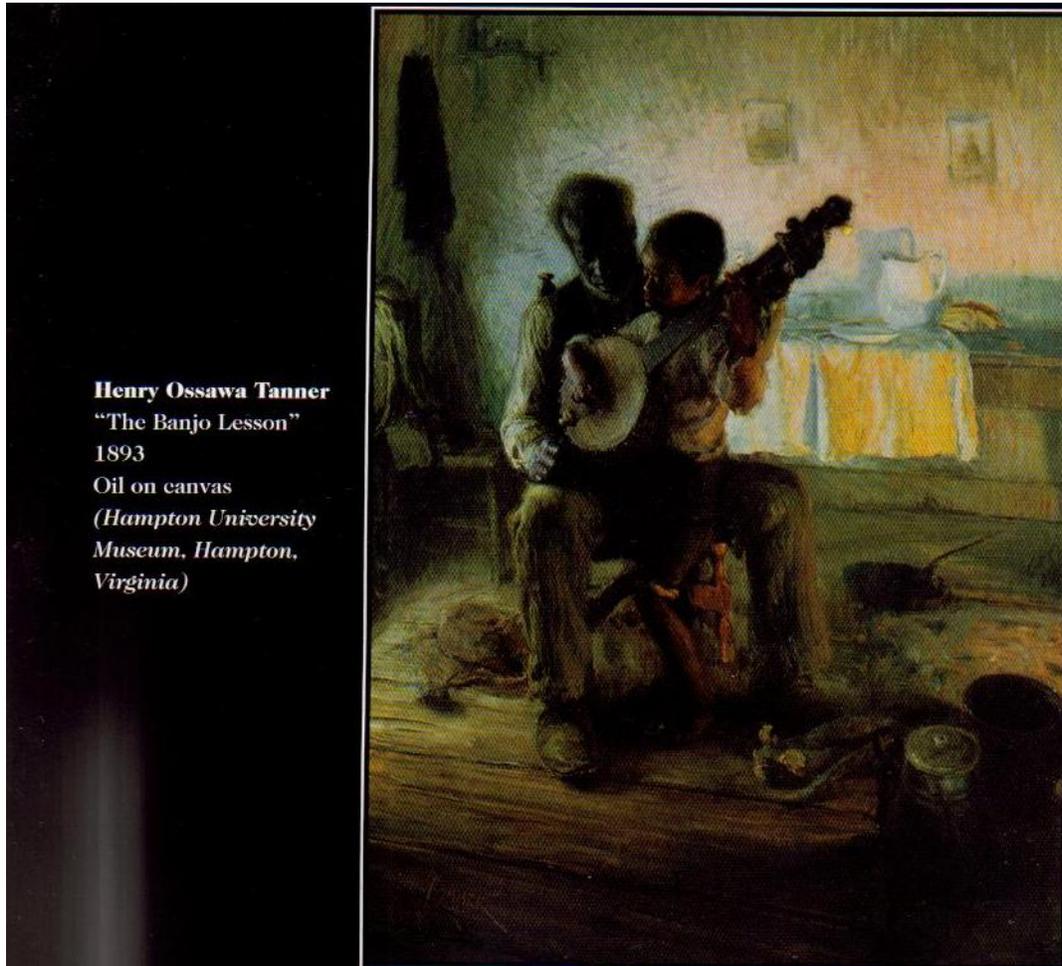
During his plantation existence the black male came to realize that not only his master dominated him but, more extensively, the entire system of enslavement – institutionalizing white racism – was dedicated to his subservience and subjugation. Venture Smith, in his slave narrative, realizes that his struggle is not only with

captor but with all who support the system of enslavement. During an incident when his captor's son "alone is unable to secure Venture's obedience, he calls three other white men to help him subdue this 'Black man gone crazy'." (Black 73) Thus, despondency at the prospect of a lifetime of subservience became a tangible realization for black males on plantations.

The powerlessness experienced by black males on plantations was compounded all the more by their inability to provide for and protect their families. Daniel Black conveys that, "African women did not dismiss their husbands because they were unable to function as wives deemed fit. Rather, husbands deemed themselves useless because, as far as they were concerned, a West African husband who could not provide for and protect his wife was worse than an infidel." (81) Gustavas Vassa, in his slave narrative, observes that "it was almost constant practice with our clerks, and other whites to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them." (Black 81) In this way white male dominance of female slaves in the presence of black males becomes another cogent source of emasculation. Powerless to help the women, black males were constantly reminded of their impotence and lack of virility. In order to cope with these daily assaults on their self concept black males constructed 'masks'. "Put simply, black men learned to act a role pleasing to the white power structure, a role which convinced their oppressors that they had finally accepted the 'reality' of white autonomy over their lives, while simultaneously struggling to find new ways of resistance which would restore to them their sense of agency." (Black 110)

Inevitably, dysfunction arose from the black males thwarted ability to live out a healthy self concept of manhood. One such dysfunction was the distortion of fatherhood which, out of necessity, led black male fathers to focus more on training their sons to survive in a 'white man's world' than teaching boys to become men. Consumed by the former, many times there was either little or no attention given to the latter. As Black states, "Therefore, what black sons learned to value most was not the extent to which they understood the meaning and function of manhood, especially as it pertained to being a good husband and father, but how well they had mastered the art of survival." (89) From a psychological standpoint, this may provide some insight into why many African American men continue to struggle with the notion of manhood today. However, it is important to note

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that it is not 'blackness' but racist society itself which imposed such conditions upon black males to impede their development and as such, the onus should not be "placed on the black family as a self-perpetuating source of pathology" (Thomas 86) but on the psychological construct propagated by a racist system.

Henry Ossawa Tanner
"The Banjo Lesson"
1893
Oil on canvas
(Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia)

Another dysfunction was the notion of black male males as 'studs' or 'bucks'. "And, without doubt, white captors contributed to this idea, for the only place in which they allowed a black man's self worth became tied to his sexual prowess, albeit not without grave psychological consequences. As stated by Alexander Thomas in his work, *Psychiatry and Racism,* "The sexual potency and abandon attributed to blacks was not considered admirable (even if some might argue that this was the 'unconscious' meaning) but rather as still another mark of their inferiority in the human family… The presumed hypersexuality of blacks was 'merely another attribute that one would expect to find among heathen, savage, beast-like men.'" (102) Thus, even the black males attempt to

exercise a modicum of autonomy within the racist system was perverted and subverted any true sense of

manhood that they might of attained.

The Free Black Male of the 19th Century (and beyond) and Manhood:

The reality of a free black man in the 19th and 20th century was not independent of a myriad of issues which

had been carried over from his physical enslavement. Ever present were institutional and systemic constructs that

served as a constant reminder of his inferiority and inequality in a white male dominated society. Daniel Black

summarizes this condition stating that "freedom was not synonymous with equality." (139) Daniel Payne, a

prominent bishop within the African Methodist Episcopal church, relates an incident within his autobiographical

narrative in which he was removed from a sleeper car on a train in preference of a white man. Payne is shocked

that his achievements mean nothing to the men who 'seized him by the collar' and comes to the realization that

"his 'free' status means that although he has no particular captor, all white men play the role at will." (Black 157)

Payne's experience is typical of black men educated and uneducated alike during the 19th and 20th century.
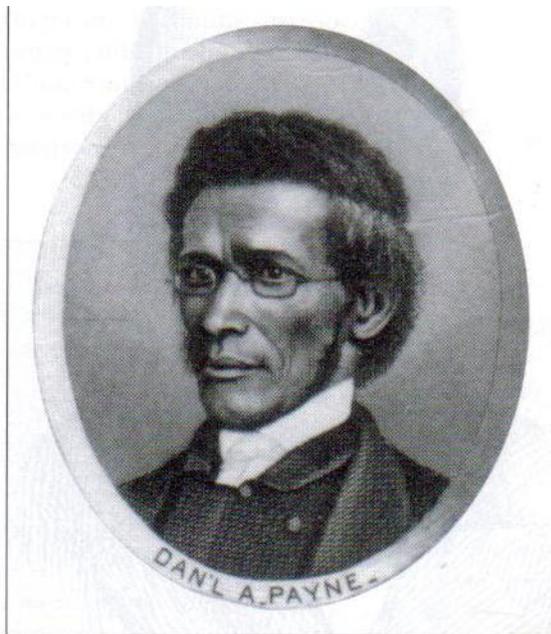
Daniel A. Payne, Methodist clergyman, bishop,
teacher, and author, was one of the most influential
people of his time. He is shown here as a young man.
(Library of Congress)

Despite ever present obstacles, for free black men of the 19th and 20th century, the prevailing sentiment was that "the best way for a black man to secure his manhood is through education... [and] the concept of black manhood seems to be rooted in the male's desire for respect, autonomy and agency." (Black 144,169) However, even the education of African Americans and particularly African American males would prove to not be without controversy. As James D. Anderson notes in his work, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935,* "Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American Education… both were fundamental to American conception of society and progress, occupied the same time and space, were fostered by the same governments, and usually were embraced by the same leaders." (1) Nonetheless, though facilitated under unequal circumstances, it was generally accepted by Negro leaders, recognizing a division in opinions pertaining to the application and scope of educational programming, that the education of the blacks and the black man specifically, is essential to the uplift and edification of the race.

Jacob Lawrence
"The Library"
1960
Tempera on fiberboard
(National Museum of American Art.
Washington, D.C./Art Resource, NY)

Psychologically speaking the black male of the 19th and 20th century faced two main obstacles. First, it was assumed in many cases that the black man was "overwhelmed by the destructive influences of the racist society." (Thomas 47) As such, it was posited by many that the systemic influences of white racism crippled the black man such that he could no longer function as a normal member of society. In turn, this type of thinking demonized any attempt by black men to offer redress to the ills of the system and condemned them of primitive emotionalism and 'blind rage'. However, as Black notes, "The anger of the oppressed man is a sign of health, not pathology. It says: 'I am condemning you for doing wrong to me.'" Second, it was and continues to be wrongly assumed by some that black males are in some way culturally deficient and that this deficiency is in some way the result of choice. Black observes, "It is a misconception 'that people live as they do because they prefer their actual mode of existence and its consequences.' In a highly stratified social system like that of the United States, poor people have a narrow margin of choice as to how they will live. It is risky indeed to infer a group's preferences and potentialities from the adaptations forced upon them by their conditions of existence." Black's analysis evidences two distinctions to be me made. First, race and poverty are two separate entities, although a racist institution may readily contribute to ones poverty. As such, most black males in the 19th and 20th century were not impoverished because they were black rather their poverty was the consequence of a racist institution that restricted their blackness. Second, the characteristics and behaviors of the impoverished black male (or any person for that matter) are not indicative of intelligence or capacity but learned experience, and to make judgments on this basis means to invite inaccuracies and oversimplifications.

Activities:

1) The Middle Passage: Journaling the Psychological Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade

   a. Have students read excerpts from Chapter 3 of Daniel P. Blacks, *Dismantling Black Manhood*, entitled "The Impacts of the Long March and the Middle Passage on the West African Concept of Manhood". This reading, which includes both narrative accounts and subsequent analysis, will enable students to acquire a sense of what the Middle Passage experience was like for black males in route to the Americas.

   b. After reading, Instruct students to create a series of journal entries, at least 5, in which they take on the persona of an African man journeying across the Atlantic as a captive on a slave ship. Journal entries should reflect students understanding of the both the nature and scope of the passage and

explore the psychological traumas endured by black males as they came to a realization of their new life as 'commodities'.

2) The Systemic Impact of Slavery (Essay)

- Daniel P. Black describes the systemic impact of slavery asserting that "everywhere the black male turned he met a law, institution, ideology, or individual that functioned to remind him of his inferiority, disallowing him agency, autonomy or respect." (63) Instruct students to write a 5 Paragraph Essay exploring the institutional affects of slavery on the black male. The paper should include a thesis statement which posits the reality of systemic impact and investigate 3 institutional elements or facets that sought to subjugate and emasculate the black male.

3) Past & Present: The Mis-Education of the Negro (Interpretation of Quotes) --- *Appendix I*

a. Instruct students to read the quotes from Carter G. Woodson's work, *The Miseducation of the Negro,* found in Appendix I.

b. After reading the quotes students should select at least 3 quotes of interest to them and then explain how the content of the citation is connected or rooted in the black males experience of America's 'peculiar institution' – slavery.

4) Black Male Sexuality: Slave Reality versus Video Portrayal (Extended Response)

- Scholars suggest that due to the circumstance of slavery which prohibited a black males expression of any facet of the concept of manhood except, on occasion, his own bed, "a black male's self-worth and pride became disproportionately tied to his sexual abilities." (Black 126) However, as psychiatrist Alexander Thomas notes in his book *Racism and Psychiatry*, "The presumed hypersexuality of blacks was 'merely another attribute that one would expect to find among heathen, savage, beast-like men.'" (102) Ask students to compare the portrayal of black male sexuality in modern videos with its conception during slavery. How are they alike or different? What are the values connected with the images and to what extent, if any, does the portrayal of black male sexuality represent a healthy concept of black manhood.

5) Poetry Analysis: "We Wear the Mask" --- *Appendix II*

a. Have students read Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem, "We Were the Mask" located in Appendix II. Remind students that the 'mask' was a construct invented out of necessity by black males during enslavement and Jim Crow reconstruction as a means of facilitating their survival while seeking to preserve a modicum of their manhood.

b. After reading the poem have students analyze it stanza by stanza. Some questions one might consider in this analysis are as follows: What does the mask represent? Does it represent one thing or many? Why does Dunbar say that the mask 'grins and lies'? What does Dunbar mean by the 'overwise' in stanza 2 and how does the mask prevent the world from becoming so? How does the mask mislead the world about the condition and disposition of the black male? What might be some lasting psychological effects of wearing the mask?

6) Academic or Industrial Education: Dubois versus Washington (Debate)

- Acquaint students with the controversy, following slavery, surrounding the issue of which approach to the implementation and application of education for newly freed slaves would be most helpful and beneficial to the uplift of the people. Have students investigate both the perspectives of Dubois and Washington on the issue of education. Place student in groups comprised of a researcher and two debaters. Once their preparation is complete, allow teams to debate one another on the issue of education using the arguments of Dubois or Washington.

7) Boyz N the Hood: The Stain of Slavery (Film Analysis)

- Allow students to watch a clip or several clips from the Movie, *Boyz N the Hood* that illustrate some of the adverse affects of slavery with which black males still struggle today. Asks student to analyze and provide a rationale for why they believe their identified challenge continues to persist so many years after the conclusion of slavery. Some questions to prompt students thinking are as follows: Is the struggle self-imposed or external or both? What are the situational elements, if any, which make it more likely for a black male to be able to overcome the identified issue? How do personality and individual differences affect a black males response to the situational challenge?

Appendix I – Quotes from Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*

- "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary." (ix)
- "The difficulty is that the "educated Negro" is compelled to live and move among his own people whom he has been taught to despise. As a rule, therefore, the 'educated Negro' prefers to buy his food from a white grocer because he has been taught that the Negro is not clean." (x)
- "The majority of the Negroes, those who did make some effort to obtain an education, did not actually receive either the industrial or the classical education… but few of them developed adequate efficiency to be able to do what they were supposedly trained to do… Such industrial education as these Negroes received, then, was merely to master a technique already discarded in progressive centers… The extent to which such higher education has been successful in leading the Negro to think, which above all is the chief purpose of education, has merely made him more of a malcontent when he can sense the drift of things and appreciate the impossibility of success in visioning conditions as they really are." (8,9)
- "In geography the races were described in conformity with the program of the usual propaganda to engender in whites a race hate of the Negro, and in the Negroes contempt for themselves… The Negro, of course, stood at the foot of the social ladder." (11)
- "If Negro institutions are to be as efficient as those for the whites in the South the same high standard for the educators to direct them should be maintained." (17)
- "Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better... The education of any people should begin with the people themselves, but the Negroes thus trained have been dreaming about the ancients of Europe and about those who have tried to imitate them." (19, 21)
- "At that time men went off to school to prepare themselves for the uplift of a downtrodden people. In our time too many Negroes go to school to memorize certain facts to pass examinations for jobs." (36)
- "The educated white man, said an observer recently, differs from the 'educated Negro' who so readily forsakes the belated element of his race… the Negro forgets the delinquents of his race and goes his way to feather his own nest, as he has done in leaving the masses in the popular churches." (37)
- "On Sunday morning, then, their pastors have to talk to the benches. While these truncated churches go higher in their own atmosphere of self-satisfaction the mentally undeveloped are left to sink lower because of the lack of contact with the better trained. If the latter exercised a little more judgment, they would be able to influence these people for good by gradually introducing advanced ideas." (44)
- "It is well understood that if by the teaching of history the white man could be further assured of his superiority and the Negro could be made to feel that he had always been a failure and that the subjection of his will to some other race is necessary the freedman, then, would still be a slave." (55)
- "A mind that remains in the present atmosphere never undergoes sufficient development to experience what is commonly known as thinking. No Negro thus submerged in the ghetto, then, will have a clear conception of the present status of the race or sufficient foresight to plan for the future; and drifts so far toward compromise that he loses moral courage." (62)
- "Feeling that the case of the Negro is hopeless, the 'educated' Negro decides upon the course of personally profiting by whatever he can do in using these people as a means to an end. He grins in their faces while 'extracting money' from them, but his heart shows no fond attachment to their despised cause." (67)

- "The lack of confidence of the Negro in himself and in his possibilities is what has kept him down. His mis-education has been a perfect success in this respect… Here we find that the Negro has failed to recover from his slavish habit of berating his own and worshipping others as perfect beings." (70)
- "No people can go forward when the majority of those who should know better have chosen to go backward, but this is exactly what most of our misleaders do. Not being learned in the history and background of the race, they figure out that there is no hope for the masses; and they decide, then, that the best thing they can do is to exploit these people for all they can and use the accumulations selfishly." (81)
- "We have very few teachers because most of those with whom we are afflicted know nothing about the children whom they teach or about their parents who influence the pupils more than the teachers themselves." (93)
- "This may seem to be a rash statement, but a study of our educational system shows that our schools are daily teaching Negroes what they can never apply in life or what is no longer profitable because of the revolution of industry by the multiplication of mechanical appliances." (101)
- "While Negroes are thus spending their means and themselves in riotous living the foreigners come to dwell among them in modest circumstances long enough to get rich and to join those who close in on these unfortunates economically until all the hopes for their redemption are lost." (106)
- "Negroes should study for the professions for all sane reasons that members of another race should go into these lines of endeavor and also on account of the particular call to serve the lowly of their race." (111)
- "History shows that it does not matter who is in power or what revolutionary forces take over the government, those who have not learned to do for themselves and have to depend solely on others never obtain any more rights or privileges in the end than they had in the beginning. " (119)
- "The chief reason why so many give such a little attention to the background of the Negro is the belief that this study is unimportant." (122)

Appendix II – "We Wear The Mask" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies

It hides our checks and shades our eyes,

This debt we pay to human guile,

Wit torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties

Why should the world be overwise

In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, only let them see us while

We wear the mask

We smile, but oh great Christ our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet and long the mile

But let the world dream otherwise

We wear the mask.

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