

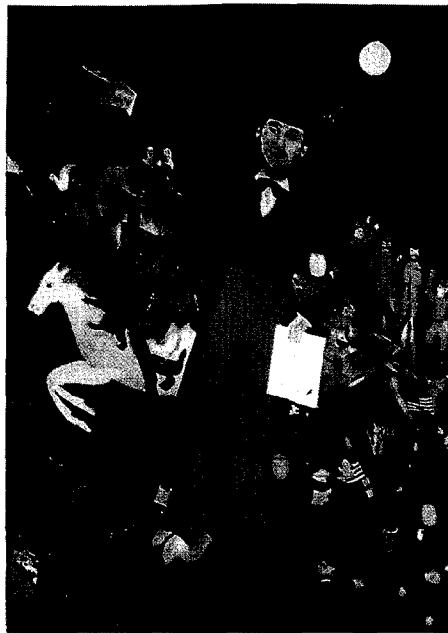
BEWARE OF RACE-PRIDE

When approached about Afrocentric education I often ask why we should teach African-American children something different from what we teach other American children. Afrocentrists provide two answers: because African-American children come from a different culture; and because we should teach all people about their own traditions.

The first answer is paradoxical because it proposes to solve the problems created by the fact that children have different cultures by emphasizing and entrenching these differences, not by trying to reduce them. I have no problem with the argument that children's home environments need to be taken into account in deciding how to teach them: there's no point in talking to kids in languages or dialects they don't understand. But this means only that culture may sometimes make a difference in how you should teach, not what you should teach. And defending teaching children different histories (Afrocentric history) or different forms of speech or writing (black English) on the grounds that this is already their culture simply begs the question. If we teach African-American children different histories from other children, then, indeed, it will become true that knowing one history while remaining ignorant of others will be part of African-American culture.

The Afrocentric argument that we must teach each child the culture of his group is powerful, yet I am skeptical. Teaching students "their own" history inevitably leads to exclusion of students who don't fit the group. Besides, traditions are worth teaching because they are good and true, never because they are mine or thine. And even if teaching children "their" history were beneficial, it would not be practical for American public schools to do so. For this would eventually require segregation into cultural groups either within or between public schools in ways that would plainly be unconstitutional. If we did have classes teaching Jewish history, and African-American history, and Anglo history and Hispanic history, and Chinese history in our schools, by what right would we forbid children from going to the "wrong" class?

There are things that we surely all believe should be taught American children, namely, the history of the American political system. This is an important reason why we cannot hope to teach each child only his cultural tradition: understanding the American constitutional system and its history requires us to know about slavery and immigration, about the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Underground Railroad and Ellis Island. If there is a sense in which each of



BY KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

these belongs more to the history of one social group more than others, there is also a clear sense in which they all belong to us all.

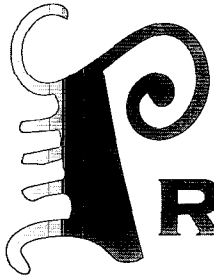
Although many African Americans would like their children to learn African-American history and literature, we must resist resorting to Afrocentric self-exclusion. Instead we should seek in our educational systems to make multiple sub-cultures known to each other. A multicultural education should be one that leaves you not only knowing and loving what is good in the traditions of your own sub-culture but also understanding and appreciating the traditions of others (and also critically rejecting the worst of all traditions). The principle of selection is clear: we should try to teach about those traditions that have

been important to American history. This means that we begin with Native American and Protestant Dutch and English and African and Iberian cultures, adding voices to the story as they were added to the nation. (All of this, I should add, presupposes a general improvement in the quality of American elementary and secondary education.)

Unlike Afrocentrism, this approach to educating our children may aid us in the difficult task of managing a multicultural society. When people organize around their own separate groups the result is not just difficulty in understanding across cultures but that we end up preferring our own kind. And if we prefer our own kind, it is easy enough to slip into preferring to vote for our own kind, to employ our own kind, and so on. These loyalties will be mobilized in politics unless a civic culture can be created that explicitly seeks to exclude them. And that is why real multiculturalism—pluralism, to use an older word—is so necessary: it is the only way to build bridges of loyalty across the ethnicities that have so often divided us.

The task for teachers and scholars is not to replace one ethnocentrism with many; not to reject old Western ideals of truth and impartiality as intrinsically biased. Rather it is to recognize that these ideals have yet to be fully lived up to in our scholarship; that the bias has derived not from scholars who took Western standards of truth (which often turn out to be everybody's standards) for granted, but that they didn't take them seriously enough.

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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

THE ERRORS OF AFROCENTRISM

by Dinesh D'Souza

AT BUNCHE MIDDLE SCHOOL IN SOUTHWEST ATLANTA, TEACHER CAROLYN HUFF ARGUES THAT THE MATHEMATICAL WISDOM OF ANCIENT EGYPT CAN HELP HER STUDENTS SOLVE ALGEBRA PROBLEMS. HUFF CLAIMS THAT THE STANDARD ALGEBRA TEXTBOOK MISLEADS STUDENTS BECAUSE IT DOES NOT CREDIT EGYPT WITH DISCOVERING WAYS TO REPRESENT UNKNOWN VARIABLES. LONG BEFORE THE GREEKS USED THE x AND THE y , SHE SAYS, EGYPTIANS AROUND 4,500 B.C. THOUGHT OF REPRESENTING VARIABLES WITH THE WORD *aha*. YET WHEN HUFF PROCEEDS TO WRITE A SERIES OF FRACTIONS ON THE BOARD, THE STUDENTS ARE STUMPED. HUFF ARGUES THAT THEIR IGNORANCE IS BESIDE THE POINT. WHAT'S IMPORTANT, SHE SAYS, IS FOR STUDENTS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE RACIAL HERITAGE OF WHAT SHE CALLS "*aha* CALCULUS." AS FOR SIMPLE ARITHMETIC, HUFF ADMITS, "I KNOW THEY DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND FRACTIONS."

Ethnic groups in America have long taken pride in their various heritages. But this process has been taken to new extremes by what is known as Afrocentrism. Radical Afrocentrism asserts all sorts of dubious claims for Africa's past, at the expense of truth and, sometimes, the current needs of African Americans. Worse, contemporary Afrocentrism is often based less on celebration of black achievements than on anger and resentment toward other peoples.

Afrocentrism and other "multicultural" programs repudiate European institutions, including Western scholarly norms, and embrace instead an alternative "black reality." This Afrocentric approach is pervasive in inner-city schools in Atlanta, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. It even appears in

mixed-race, middle-class suburbs like Prince George's County, Maryland, where a speaker at an Afrocentrism conference told how melanin, the coloring agent in skin, helps blacks "speak and read faster," as well as "glide in the air like a Magic Johnson or hit top speeds like Florence Joyner."

D.C. Schools Superintendent Franklin Smith hired consultant Abena Walker for \$250,000 to develop a pilot Afrocentric program for the students in his charge, who rank among the nation's poorest achievers. Walker trains teachers at an unaccredited institution called Pan-African University, which she founded and from which she awarded herself her own master's degree. The outline for her elementary-school education program calls for harnessing the power of *Nommo*, or African "word magic," because "to control *Nommo* is to control the generation and transformation of sound, energy, thoughts, and action." Walker acknowledges that her approach does not emphasize traditional academics: "We feel that academics, that's the easy part, because our children are just brilliant." But Russell Adams, chairman of the Afro-American studies department at Howard, the capital's historically black university, disagrees. He has attacked Walker's brand of Afrocentrism, complaining that "neophytes" and "dilettantes" are jeopardizing the education of young people with claims that fail to "sort out historic fact from fiction."

Afrocentrism is not limited to schools: it is increasingly the official ideology of rap musicians, community activists (including the Nation of Islam), and black



Portrait of an Egyptian, from a mummy found at Hawara, painted about 150 A.D. Afrocentrists insist that ancient Egypt was a Negroid culture. Actually, experts say, it was a multiracial Mediterranean civilization.