

BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION, BLACK CULTURE, AND THE AMERICAN IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

*[E]ducation is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments...It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment.*

*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 493, (1954)

As the U.S. Supreme Court recognized in its historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, educational institutions provide more than instruction in reading, mathematics, science and other academic disciplines. They also inculcate the cultural values and identity that provide the foundation for citizenship and civic engagement. When the Supreme Court decided *Brown* more than a half century ago, the justices apparently assumed that there was broad agreement about a shared American cultural identity in the context of a pluralistic society.

The unstated assumption in *Brown* was not entirely accurate. Differently situated groups of Americans have not had the same interactions with the country's formal institutions. The American cultural identity evolved in a context of racial separation and rights proscribed by segregation laws. *Brown* reversed the 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* but the Court did not fully appreciate the extent of *Plessy's* influence. The Constitution's assertion of equality was trumped by *Plessy* which exempted African Americans from the protections and rights afforded to whites.

The decision reflects of the influence of the former slaveholders and of the antipathy of ordinary whites who were repulsed by the notion of blacks as equals. After *Plessy* the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were all but nullified in the south. In the north and south, African Americans were confined to substandard housing in segregated neighborhoods and excluded from all but the lowest paying, least desirable occupations. This history, which is America's enduring paradox, had a significant effect in the development of the American identity.

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Most of the rights and obligations of American citizens are based on state, rather than federal, laws. Public schools are established by states and governed primarily by state laws. School districts are political subdivisions of state governments. Schools are operated by elected governing boards and financed primarily by local property taxes.

Pedagogical practices are determined by each local district. States license teachers, set certification standards and provide financial assistance to local districts. The federal government provides financial assistance mainly through categorical grants that are conditioned upon the states and local school boards' agreement to develop programs that reflect educational priorities set by Congress. To receive federal funding, states and local districts have aligned the content of programmatic offerings and special services with federal priorities.

With the exception of a common language, there has never been one set of cultural values that shape a shared identity for all Americans. The Declaration of Independence speaks broadly of certain "fundamental truths," but that document was intended to benefit white male property owners, many of whom owned African slaves. America is a republic consisting of 50, quasi-sovereign states. The nation has always had a myriad of different religions with different, and sometimes conflicting, tenets.

Generic America, the America of the imagination, is a nation of white, English-speaking descendants of immigrants from Western Europe whose values and traditions are based on Anglo-Saxon cultural norms. With the exception of the indigenous Native Americans, our ancestors migrated not only from Europe, but Asia, Africa, South America and other localities across the globe. They represent many religious and cultural traditions.

The system of racial segregation isolated the African American population, forcing it to develop its own set of values and traditions. Efforts to desegregate public schools in America have been complicated by the different, and sometimes conflicting, cultural perspectives of whites, African Americans and other racial minorities. Given this diversity, what are, or should be, the "cultural values" that are inculcated by America's public schools?

### PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN CULTURE

Culture is the distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a social group encompassing its art, literature, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. It includes the values and behaviors shared by the group. American culture is based largely on Western European culture. It has been influenced to some extent by native peoples, Africans brought to the United States as slaves, and other more recent immigrants from Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere, but the predominate influence has always been Western European.

Much of American culture is based on the ideals of The Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence, for example, emphasizes the importance of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The ideals of liberty and individual

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rights are embedded in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights. These principles shaped the nation's economic, political, and social development. Educational institutions, particularly public schools, have had a central role in inculcating American identity and culture in succeeding generations. For these reasons, it is useful to begin by considering how this institution developed.

Public schools in America can be traced to the colonial era, before the Revolutionary War. When he served in Virginia's General Assembly, Thomas Jefferson proposed a system of public schools which would have provided three years of public schooling for all children and advanced education for a select few. This would, as Jefferson put it, "rak[e] a few geniuses from the rubbish." Jefferson's efforts to persuade Virginia's legislature to establish public schools failed, but he eventually led the successful effort to create the state-supported University of Virginia.

The development of public schools in America began in Massachusetts primarily through the work and influence of Horace Mann. In 1837, Mann became the first Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. Mann soon realized the need for public support for education. He inspected the schools across the state and found large disparities in the facilities and programs of instruction.

Mann held a series of meetings in which he promoted the creation of a system of "common schools." These would be tuition-free public schools that provided quality instruction. Standards would be set and enforced at the state level and the entire system would be funded with tax dollars. Common schools would serve both males and females and would teach a common body of knowledge. Mann described his vision: "It is a free school system, it knows no distinction of rich and poor... it throws open its doors and spreads the table of its bounty for all children in the state... Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is an equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance wheel of the social machinery."

As a result of Mann's efforts, a training school for teachers was established in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1839. Mann successfully advocated the establishment of free libraries. He persuaded officials to increase teacher salaries; school committees were compensated, new schools were built, and state aid to education increased. By the Civil War, all of the northeastern states established departments of education, teacher training programs, and tax-supported public schools.

### INCULCATING AN AMERICAN IDENTITY

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the role of public schools in establishing an American identity took on an increasing importance with the arrival of waves of European immigrants. By 1840, nearly half of New York City's residents were immigrants, many of whom were Irish Catholics. Irish Catholic children attended schools where the King James Bible was read, Protestant hymns were sung, and Protestant prayers were recited. The orientation of the teaching was

typically Protestant and often anti-Irish and anti-Catholic. Catholics became increasingly uncomfortable with the ethnic and religious bias in New York City's schools. They demanded that city funds be made available for parochial schools.

This request was met with strenuous opposition. Opponents argued that allowing Catholics a portion of the public school funds would lead to a flood of requests from other religious denominations. At times the conflict escalated into violence. In 1844 a Catholic church in Pennsylvania was burned, killing thirteen people in what became known as the "Philadelphia Bible riots." John Hughes was named Archbishop of New York in 1850. He was the leader in an effort that created a privately-funded national system of Catholic schools, which eventually became the leading alternative to public schools.

As the Western regions of the United States were settled, rudimentary schools were established. Schools were seen as an attractive and stabilizing feature in isolated settlements. Many of the schools were run by women. Catherine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister, was a leader in efforts to promote the use of female teachers in the West. She also advocated teaching as a respectable occupation for middle-class women. As a result, many women from the Eastern states traveled west to take teaching positions.

Public schools were established in the Eastern and Midwestern regions of the U.S. before and after the Civil War. The growth of these institutions escalated during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. School expenditures rose from 69 million dollars in 1870 to 147 million dollars in 1890. During the same period, school enrollments increased to 7.6 million students. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States was providing more education to more children than any other nation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States was becoming more urban and ethnically diverse. Cities were growing in a rapidly industrializing nation. Manufacturing created a need for inexpensive labor. Waves of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe responded to that demand. Between 1890 and 1930, more than 22 million immigrants came to the United States. After they arrived and took jobs in factories and elsewhere, they enrolled their children in public schools.

During this period, John Dewey, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, became an influential figure in public education. He was a leading proponent of what became known as the progressive education movement. Dewey believed that common schools had become repressive institutions that did not adequately promote intellectual exploration and growth. Dewey and other progressive educators opposed those who promoted academic education for elites and vocational training for the masses.

Dewey argued that schools should teach students critical thinking and problem solving skills rather than rote lessons. Dewey also believed that schools should help students interact with others. In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, progressive educators instructed immigrants in hygiene,

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manners, and home economics. Immigrant students also learned American styles of eating, dressing and other cultural habits.

There were other forces that influenced public school education in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before World War I the children of German immigrants were taught in their own language in places such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. After the conclusion of the War, anti-German sentiments resulted in the enactment of laws requiring English-only instruction. Schools were prohibited from providing instruction in languages other than English and they emphasized American customs and traditions.

During this period an assimilationist paradigm was firmly established. Educators facilitated the Americanization of immigrants by inculcating the values and traditions of an Anglo-Saxon culture. Customs, language, and other forms of cultural expressions from the “old country” were discarded. In public schools good citizenship became more a matter of conforming to a middle class pattern of behavior than questioning the political system operated. Many schools required students to recite the Lord’s Prayer and passages from the Bible. The school calendar was organized around Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Other, more secular holidays, such as Thanksgiving, celebrated American traditions. Students pledged allegiance to the flag every morning, sang “America the Beautiful” at assemblies, and were taught from texts that extolled the virtues of the Founding Fathers.

### COMMON SCHOOLS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS: THE PEDAGOGY OF SUBORDINATION

During the final decades of the nineteenth century a dual system of public education was established in the South: one for whites and another for blacks. Instead of inculcating American culture and identity, the educational program for African Americans was predicated on political disenfranchisement, civic inequality and racial segregation. Black students were trained to accept a subordinate status.

This approach to education is identified with the educational philosophy of Booker T. Washington, the black educator who was the founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. It was, however, a pedagogical model that was developed at Hampton Institute, the institution where Washington was educated. Hampton was a school established in Hampton, Virginia, to educate African American and Native American students. When Washington attended Hampton, it was neither a college nor a trade school; it was a normal school composed of elementary school graduates who were seeking some additional years of teacher-training courses so they could qualify for normal school teaching certificates. The Hampton Model envisioned the removal of black voters and politicians from southern political life, the relegation of black workers to the lowest levels of labor in the southern economy, and the perpetuation of a southern racial hierarchy.

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The Hampton Model was embraced by educational reformers who were supported by northern philanthropists. It was designed to produce unskilled and semi-skilled black workers who would provide inexpensive labor for the southern economy. The product of this training would be a diligent and reliable worker with an elementary education and industrial training. Manual labor, rather than scholarship, was the criterion for educational development.

Southern planters were skeptical about the value of any form of education. They were accustomed to a society in which black laborers worked for them under a system of intimidation, violence, and compulsion. Social control rested on coercion. Most southerners believed that with intelligent direction, blacks could be suitable and inexpensive laborers who could obey orders but were incapable of directing their own labor.

In 1895 Washington stood on a platform in what is now a park in Atlanta, Georgia. He addressed large and mainly white audience at the Cotton States Exposition. Washington shared the platform with a distinguished group that included the governor of Georgia. During his speech Washington invoked a powerful metaphor that would be seen as the solution for race relations in the South.

Extending a hand toward the audience, Washington stated, “[i]n all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet as one hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” The crowd responded with enthusiastic applause and the governor of Georgia rushed over to shake Washington's hand. Newspapers across the nation carried accounts of the remarks. President Grover Cleveland telegraphed a congratulatory note. After the speech, Washington's position as the preeminent leader of black America was secured.

As Washington delivered his Atlanta address, a test case orchestrated by a group of African Americans in New Orleans, Louisiana, was on its way to the Supreme Court. The case challenged a local ordinance that required segregation on railroads. The plaintiff, Homer Plessy, argued that the ordinance violated the Fourteenth and Thirteenth Amendments to the Constitution because it treated black passengers differently and less favorably than white passengers. Plessy and his supporters were confident that their challenge would succeed.

In 1896, however, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that, “the enforced separation of the races... neither abridges the privileges or immunities of the colored man, deprives him of this property without due process of law nor denies him equal protection of the law within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment.” The Court stated that “[i]f one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane.”

*Plessy* endorsed racial segregation and established the “separate-but-equal” doctrine. The Court held that laws requiring segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment as long as the separate facilities provided for blacks were equal to those available to whites. In reality, accommodations for African Americans were always separate but hardly equal to those reserved for

whites. After *Plessy*, African Americans were segregated, disenfranchised, and limited to the lowest paying, least desirable occupations.

Washington and his supporters were able to persuade southerners that their educational program would produce a more productive and content labor force. They convinced southern planters and northern philanthropists that their system would improve the health, morals, and efficiency of black workers and would socialize black youth to the discipline and values needed to maintain race and class relations. As a white educator wrote in 1899, “[Blacks] will willingly fill the more menial positions, and do the heavy work, at less wages, than the American white man or any foreign race which has yet to come to our shores.”

Training black teachers for normal schools was a critical feature in the development of the economic and social structure. Black teachers were influential and highly regarded in the African American community. White educational leaders recognized that teachers would be critical to shaping the social, economic, and political consciousness of the black masses. The Hampton-Tuskegee model would be propagated to the black masses by black teachers.

After the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington and the success of Tuskegee Institute, the Hampton-Tuskegee model was embraced by public school officials throughout the south. It was reflected in the course offerings available in black schools. School curricula prepared students for careers as cooks, maids, laundresses, porters, chauffeurs, and the like. African Americans were intended to occupy the lowest paying, least desirable occupations. Washington’s pedagogy of subordination was sustained until it was challenged by the litigation campaign that culminated with *Brown v. Board of Education*.

#### SEGREGATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN AESTHETIC

One result of enforced separation was the development of distinct African-American experience. The culture arose from the experiences of African Americans in the United States first as enslaved people and later, as a group separated from other Americans by segregation. W.E.B. DuBois described it as, a “double-consciousness,” which is both American *and* black. As DuBois put it, “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

One example of black cultural expression can be found in music. Several musical genres, including, hip hop, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and other contemporary musical forms evolved from blues, jazz, and gospel music which were developed by African American musicians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Blues, jazz, and gospel music were derived from spirituals sung by enslaved Africans during the antebellum era. Music rooted in the black

experience influenced the development of musical genres at the national and international levels.

Music is not the only manifestation of a distinct black culture. Another example can be found in the Harlem Renaissance, the literary and artistic movement that flourished in the 1920s. In the years following World War I, when large numbers of African American families residing in the rural south migrated to northern cities. By the early 1920s, Harlem became the creative Mecca for African American writers, artists, and musicians. The Harlem Renaissance is known primarily for the literary works of that period but it extended to the visual arts and was heavily influenced by jazz.

Writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance included Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Rudolf Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nella Larsen, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay. An older generation of African American writers, such as James Weldon Johnson, was also active during the period.

Sociologist Charles S. Johnson encouraged the movement by organizing an awards ceremony for young writers and publishing their work in *Opportunity*, the Urban League magazine that he edited. W.E.B. DuBois promoted writers and artists by publishing their work in *The Crisis*, the magazine he edited for the NAACP. Critic and teacher Alain Locke was another influential figure who edited *The New Negro: An Interpretation* in 1925. What these writers shared were their depictions of African American life in complex and realistic ways. They rejected dialect poetry, black-faced minstrels, and other stereotypes that had long been a staple of literature and entertainment.

The Harlem Renaissance reached its apex during the “roaring ‘20s”--the jazz age and the era of Prohibition. Harlem nightclubs were a favorite haunt of affluent whites. They were attracted to the jazz, bootleg liquor, and exotic atmosphere that could be found in the Cotton Club and other entertainment venues in Harlem. Whites’ fascination with Harlem caused commercial publishers to notice black writers and publish their fiction and poetry.

The Harlem writers depicted the many dimensions of black life in ways that had not been previously presented. W.E.B. Dubois and other black leaders feared that the frank depictions in some of works sensationalized the Harlem scene. The younger writers had a different perspective. They embraced their racial heritage and found it a source of artistic inspiration. One of the best expressions of the ethos of the Harlem Renaissance was stated in Langston Hughes’ 1926 essay, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. As Hughes explained:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, “I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet,” meaning, I believe, “I want to write like a white poet”; meaning subconsciously, “I would like to be a white poet”; meaning behind that, “I would like to be white.” And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. ...So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, “I want to be a

poet, not a Negro poet,” as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. ... We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

The Harlem Renaissance ended with the onset of the great depression. Black artists and writers pursued their craft, but the literary establishment's fascination with Black writers declined. Richard Wright, the best-selling black writer of the 1930s and '40s, was based in Chicago and subsequently moved to Paris. He was not identified with the Harlem Renaissance. Wright's depiction of black life in Mississippi and Chicago portrayed the travails of black families during the great migration from field to factory. In the early 1950s Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was a best-seller and is now included in the academic canon. *Invisible Man* added an existentialist perspective to African American literature. In the 1950s James Baldwin emerged as the dominant black voice in literary circles. In *The Fire Next Time* and several other books and essays he explored black life in urban communities. The development of a separate and distinct African American culture would complicate efforts to desegregate public schools in the years after segregation laws were declared unconstitutional.

#### BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION AND THE INTEGRATIONIST IDEAL

In the years following the *Plessy* decision, civil rights advocacy organizations were established, including the NAACP. The NAACP's program reflected an integrationist philosophy; African Americans were citizens entitled to the same rights and privileges as whites. If blacks were allowed to participate in the mainstream of American society they could assimilate in the same manner as European immigrants. In the early 1930s, after years of lobbying and public education, the NAACP shifted its focus. In 1935 the organization hired Charles H. Houston, a Harvard-trained African American law professor, to lead a campaign that would challenge segregation in the courts. Houston was, at the time, the Dean of Howard Law School where he trained the generation of African American lawyers who lead the fight for civil rights in the courts.

In the 1930s, the separate-but-equal doctrine was firmly entrenched. Houston did not want to risk a reaffirmation of *Plessy* given the conservative legal climate, so he devised an indirect approach: the "equalization strategy." When the plan was implemented, cases would be filed arguing that states operating segregated schools were in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment based on the substandard and demonstrably unequal facilities maintained for black students. Houston calculated that if the equality aspect of *Plessy's*

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“separate-but-equal” doctrine were enforced, states would be compelled to make black schools physically and otherwise equal to the white institutions. Under the pressure of litigation, segregation would eventually collapse under its own weight.

The litigation campaign focused on graduate and professional schools where the states were most vulnerable to legal challenges. Several publicly funded black colleges had been established in the south, but virtually none of them provided graduate or professional training. The first “equalization” case, *Pearson v. Murray*, involved a black student’s efforts to be admitted to the University of Maryland’s Law School. At the trial’s conclusion, the judge ordered the University to admit Murray to the entering class the following semester. A similar case, *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada*, was filed in Missouri. When that case reached the Supreme Court, it ordered the black student’s admission to the University of Missouri Law School.

In 1946, the NAACP filed a suit against the University of Oklahoma. The Supreme Court held, in *Sipuel v. Board of Regents*, that Oklahoma was obligated to provide legal instruction to black students. A similar case, *Sweatt v. Painter*, was filed against the University of Texas and another case, *McLaurin v. Board of Regents*, was brought against the University of Oklahoma. The Supreme Court issued decisions in both cases on the same day in 1950. In opinions that acknowledged the stigmatic and other intangible injuries that segregation caused, the Court ruled in the NAACP’s favor, but stopped short of reversing *Plessy*.

After the rulings in *Sweatt* and *McLaurin*, the NAACP lawyers decided that an adequate foundation for a direct challenge to *Plessy* had been established. Eventually, six cases were filed in five jurisdictions and consolidated in the Supreme Court. The decision in those cases, *Brown v. Board of Education*, was announced on May 17, 1954. The Court concluded that “[t]o separate [black] children from others of similar age and qualifications generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in ways unlikely ever to be undone” and ruled that “[s]eparate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

The Supreme Court’s 1954 decision did not address the remedy. The cases were held over and reargued. In the 1955 decision in *Brown II*, the Court sent the cases back to the trial courts and ordered the school boards to develop plans in which desegregation would proceed with “all deliberate speed” under the supervision of the local federal courts. The southern states reacted to *Brown* with open hostility. For years, southern officials refused to comply with *Brown* or engaged in protracted delaying tactics.

In the late 1960s, after a decade and one-half of “massive resistance,” the Supreme Court finally decided to end the South’s intransigence. In *Green v. County Board of New Kent County*, the Court held in 1968 that states with segregated schools had an affirmative duty to eradicate all vestiges of the formerly segregated system “root and branch.” In *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled in 1969 that the “continued

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operation of segregated schools under a standard allowing ‘all deliberate speed’ for desegregation is no longer constitutionally permissible...the obligation of every school district is to terminate dual school systems at once and operate now and hereafter only unitary schools.” In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, decided in 1971, the Court endorsed busing as a means of achieving racial balance in individual schools. Fifteen years after *Brown*, desegregation efforts finally commenced in earnest. During this phase the goal was achieving racial balance in schools with an underlying assumption that black students in integrated schools would assimilate white norms.

### THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown* sparked the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s. For more than a decade, an unprecedented number of marches, “sit-ins” and other forms of protest activities were organized. Martin Luther King and others emerged as leaders of what soon became a widespread, grass roots protest movement. The nonviolent protests led by Dr. King and others were predicated on an integrationist ideology in which African Americans would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Within a few years, a different and competing philosophy appeared. The black power movement, which emerged in the mid-1960s, had a profound influence on the evolution of African American culture and identity. It was grounded on an insistence on dignity and self-reliance, economic and political independence, and freedom from white authority.

The assimilationist ideology of the civil rights movement was rejected. Black nationalists argued that African Americans should focus on improving their own communities rather than assimilating into white society. Other interpretations emphasized the African roots of African Americans’ cultural heritage. Supporters of this view encouraged the study and celebration of black history and culture. Another aspect of Black Power advocated a revolutionary political struggle to reject racism and imperialism in the United States and abroad.

The posthumously published *Autobiography of Malcolm X* was widely read and highly influential. During his life, and after his death, Malcolm X influenced black activists. He was, in many ways, the inspiration for the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Black Power was a political and social justice movement that reflected a new racial consciousness among African Americans. Stokely Carmichael, the charismatic leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), is thought to have been the first to utter the phrase “black power,” which became the movement’s slogan. Frustrated by the lack of progress toward desegregation in the late 1960s, SNCC rejected Martin Luther King and other black leaders’ commitment to non-violent protest. The group decided to advocate a strategy of self-determination and self-defense. As one commentator recalled:

During the... 1966 Meredith march, [in Mississippi] SNCC field workers Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks used the chant of “Black Power” as a counter to the speeches of Martin Luther King and other Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLC) leaders. While King was calling for equal rights, Carmichael and other SNCC workers would set up a call (“what do we want”) and lead their audiences in answering (“black power.”) At that time black power was often translated to mean Black political and economic control of predominately Black towns, cities and counties in the Deep South, especially in Alabama and Mississippi.

The atmosphere of the 1960s was highly charged. Images ranging from police dogs attacking peaceful protesters to cities burning during urban riots were staples of nightly newscasts. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were assassinated. It was difficult, if not impossible, to ignore these events. Black artists and writers were inspired. They believed that the cultural heritage, history, and African roots of black Americans were critical to a much needed redefinition of black identity.

The Black Arts movement of the 1960s was, as Larry Neal explained, “a cultural revolution in art and ideas.” Writers and artists challenged traditional western standards for art and literature and sought to develop a “black aesthetic.” It was, as Neal stated, the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.” There were many writers associated with the Black Arts Movement. Some of the better known included LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) Harold Cruse, Nathan Hare, Sonia Sanchez, Ed Bullins, Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti) and Nikki Giovanni. In poetry and prose, these writers tied the political themes of the Black Power movement to their artistic expressions. The expressions and images were dominated by militant protest themes.

Visual artists were also inspired by the Black Power movement. 1963 Spiral, a collective of African American artists including Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Emma Amos, Reginald Gammon, Richard Mayhew, and Alvin Hollingsworth, was established to discuss the commitment of African American artists to the civil rights movement and to debate the necessity of defining a black aesthetic in the visual arts. In 1967, another group of artists established the Organization of Black American Culture. All of these groups linked their artistic expressions directly to the political goals of the Black Power movement. By the early 1970s the Black Arts movement, like the Black Power movement, was in decline as a result of external pressures and internal dissension, but the debate about the meaning and significance of black culture did not end.

#### BLACK IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

Blues, jazz, and other musical genre forms began as artistic expressions of African American life under oppressive conditions. Contemporary music reflecting African American anger and angst continues in this tradition. In the

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1980s, rap music emerged as an expression of the post-industrial alienation of inner city youths. Rap originated in the South Bronx section of New York City. New Yorkers outside of the Bronx were introduced to rap by song called “The Message,” recorded by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Break dancing soon became commonplace; a new “hip-hop” culture emerged. “The Message” was not the first rap song, but its narrative describing the short and tragic life of an inner city youth was different from other forms of popular music.

Rap’s roots are in the poetry and spoken word recordings of the late 1960s. It is a commentary on the violence, isolation, and impoverished conditions of black life in the inner city. It speaks the language of the street with a pulsating beat. Consider the following passage from Grandmaster Flash’s, “It’s like a Jungle out Here”:

Random hits on the block, young homies packing glocks...  
Take a look into his eyes, it’s evidence of a homicide  
Lives getting taken faster than the egg leaves the womb  
Consider me endangered ‘cause I know I’m dying soon

It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
how I keep from goin’ under (how I keep from goin’ under)  
It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder  
how I keep from goin’ under (how I keep from goin’ under)...

These lyrics convey the danger, isolation, and fears of inner city youths residing in economically depressed, hypersegregated neighborhoods. The constant threats of violence, the need to carry firearms for self-protection, and the lack of any hope for a future are the themes of this song’s narrative.

Rap and hip hop are affecting the direction of African American culture especially among the younger generation. Some elements of rap and hip hop have been commercialized by a profit-hungry entertainment industry that is exploiting racial stereotypes. A large amount of what is seen now on MTV and BET celebrates a ghetto culture where the “Code of the Streets” prevails. This is represented by oppositional behavior and attitudes that reject traditional values and identification with race-conscious uplift in favor of advocacy for individuals to engage in activities that are self-destructive and pose a danger to others. Conspicuous consumption, ostentatious displays of jewelry, fast cars, and women are the images that proliferate in the mass media.

Rap is not monolithic. In the commercialized version that proliferates on the airwaves, rap’s original message has been obscured by images that commodify blackness, much in the same way that pornography commodifies women. Blacks are presented as objects for entertainment and consumption rather than people. The product of commercialized rap is an extravagant, “ghetto fabulous” image of life in inner city neighborhoods. Young blacks and whites are attracted to the “gangsta” images of tough ghetto youths driving luxury cars, “iced down” in flashy jewelry, wearing oversized shirts, and baggy

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pants, with a scantily clad woman on each arm. The depictions of “thug life” on rap videos are little more than an adolescent male fantasy featuring stereotypical images of inner city youths. However, the entertainment industry is profiting from a product that is manufactured in recording studios. This commercialized version of rap is not authentic and its images do not reflect reality.

Many rap and hip hop performers have remained true to the genres’ roots which express the danger and alienation that are ubiquitous elements of life in urban America. They also recognize that the end of the official regime of racial discrimination in the 1960s did not eliminate the cultural bias that perpetuates the white norm. The perspectives of young African Americans are not as much a refusal to assimilate by “acting white” as they are a rejection of the white norm. The message that authentic hip hop conveys is frustration and anger with “whiteness” as a norm that excludes African Americans and consigns them to a subordinate status.

### AMERICAN CULTURE AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

The material, intellectual, and emotional aspects of life in inner city neighborhoods are different from the traditions and beliefs of white suburbanites. The decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* resulted in the end of formal racial restrictions in school admissions in the United States, but it did not end racial segregation in schools. Nor has it created equal access to educational opportunities for students from groups whose interests have been historically subordinated to those of European descended Americans. Most black and brown children attend school with other black and brown children. Poor children attend under-resourced schools; children from affluent families attend better funded schools with other affluent and predominately white children. Educational outcomes persist along historic patterns, with traditional measures reflecting much higher achievement levels for affluent white students. Addressing the performance disparity has become a national priority.

Absent from the current discussion is any urgency to continue racial balance strategies, which were designed to ameliorate the deleterious effects of segregated schooling. Many observers are critical of the theoretical construct that equated quality education for African Americans with physical proximity to whites. They believe that equity should be measured by student outcomes. The current reform discussion advocates specific performance targets that all students are expected to meet at regular intervals. Federal funding is now conditioned on the use of standardized tests to measure the quality of instruction at individual schools. Curriculum, classroom learning experiences, student dress and decorum have become increasingly standardized, in hopes of producing the model American student, with test scores at and above the national average.

This has not always been the case. Public education in America has historically been highly decentralized. The power to establish and operate

public schools is an attribute of state sovereignty. The day-to-day management of schools is usually the responsibility of local school boards, which are state agencies. They are responsible for selecting a superintendent, setting an annual budget and constructing and maintaining buildings. School Boards are also responsible for the curricula and courses of study, selecting textbooks, and evaluating the effectiveness with which the schools are achieving their educational missions.

The historic, decentralized approach is changing with the movement toward establishing national standards. In August 1981, Terrell Bell, President Ronald Reagan's secretary of education, assembled a panel of experts and asked them to examine the quality of education in the United States. The result was a report, "A Nation at Risk," which released in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The authors concluded American education had been eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatened the nation's future. Among the remedies proposed was the establishment of a common core curriculum at the national level. The report recommended that high school students should study English for four years; mathematics, science, and social studies for three years; and computer science at least one semester before graduating.

In September 1989, President George H.W. Bush convened the nation's governors in Charlottesville, Virginia, for a National Education Summit. Their aim was to draft national goals for education. The participants agreed to a number of objectives including a goal that American students should leave the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades with competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history and geography.

The enactment in 2002 of the No Child Left Behind Act has produced a new, and for the first time, national education strategy. This law requires states to establish and implement accountability systems for public schools. The accountability systems must be based on state-developed proficiency standards in reading and mathematics. The Act requires annual testing for all students enrolled in grades 3-8, as well as annual progress objectives that will insure that students perform at the levels that standards require within 12 years. Assessment data must be reported and disaggregated by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency. Schools that do not achieve adequate progress toward student proficiency goals will be subjected to corrective actions and restructuring measures that will help them meet the state's standards.

Elected officials and many educators have embraced standardization and testing. Advocates of this approach believe that it reflects the triumph of scientific approaches over those rooted in literary or epistolary traditions. The federal government claims a "scientific" mindset in its use of formulas and algorithms to define what is essentially an ethic derived from the same tradition that produced earlier "ideal" citizens. However, over reliance on standardized testing tends to limit instruction to subject-aligned numerical indicators and asserts this as the only way to demonstrate merit. Using these measures to

compare the performance of white students to those of students of color has meant that those most able to meet the standard are overwhelmingly white and high income.

While standardized test are not the best yardstick for measuring student ability, an important goal of the standards movement is elimination of a longstanding emphasis on remedial courses that have disproportionately enrolled poor students and students of color in schools that track more affluent white students into rigorous, enriched curricula. Children from the dominant group are encouraged to solve problems and apply knowledge. By contrast, the school experience of subordinated groups has been most frequently characterized by continuous involvement in paper and pencil tasks, limited student-to-student interaction, rote memory and repetitive drills.

Despite the implicit messages about African American inferiority in discussion and analyses of the achievement gap, some in the African American community are cautiously optimistic. They hope that the standards movement, which holds schools to a consistent and higher standard for all students, will lead to increased access to rigorous instruction, such as honors and advanced placement courses, and progress toward equalizing educational opportunities.

The problem with the new strategy is that it overemphasizes performance on standardized tests, which reflect state versions of national content standards. The knowledge and skills required for successful test performance are, in essence, official versions of “what every American child needs to know.” This is a vision that is largely irrelevant to the experiences that most inner city students are living. In the standards-driven environment, the model student studies hard, performs well in school and on tests and is rewarded for achievement. This may not work for inner city males who regularly experience the psychological assaults of racial profiling and other forms of discrimination when they drive, shop, or try to hail taxis. They understand that following the rules will not create the same results in their lives that it does for whites.

There are other problems. Within the school setting, the social behavior of poor children and children of color has been subjected to more scrutiny than white students. They are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary measures. While African American students represent less than 20% of the public school enrollment, they represent more than a third of students suspended annually. When students’ lived experiences in educational settings are marked by unfair treatment, it is unlikely that they will commit themselves to the outcomes sought by the institution or believe that the expected outcomes have much to do with them.

Researchers have found that schooling variables, especially teacher expectations, curriculums, and grouping practices, heavily influence student achievement. The standards movement sets the expected achievement bar at the same height for all students. There are, however, questions about whether high stakes testing will drive school practices and curricula to an exclusive focus on test preparation. This would hinder the efforts of socially conscious

teachers who pursue pedagogical practices that support the ability of students to see different group histories and their personal interests addressed in the day-to-day transactions within the school environment. Some progressive educators fear standards-driven approaches will, in the end, turn out to be yet another mechanism to sustain a social order that preserves historic advantages for white students who are nurtured by the myth of the generic American

In many educational settings there are cultural barriers that separate black students from white teachers. Culturally anchored body language, language patterns, dress, and behaviors of African American students are foreign and sometimes threatening to America's overwhelmingly white and female teaching force. White, middle-class, suburban females comprise more than 90% of those teaching across the nation. Historically, they have not had the experience or desire to respond effectively to African American students' cultural identity. Far too often their approach has been to treat cultural differences as intellectual deficits and to impose special education designations, which are intended to apply to students with learning disabilities, on disproportionate number of black students.

The academic performance disparities between African American students and white students reflect a range of complex factors that are not easily isolated for intervention, and there are no clearly defined strategies for remedying the disparity. There are, however, clear consequences for students who do not meet the standards. Many students simply leave school. According to some sources, the dropout rate for African American youth is as high as 50%, with the rate for African American males at more than 55%. Without a basic education, the likelihood of failure is virtually assured in a marketplace that demands educated, technically competent and highly skilled workers. Without a change in the education establishment's approach to instruction, this trend is likely to continue

## CONCLUSION

There is an intensifying debate concerning the meaning of American cultural identities and their associated values. These are political and philosophical disagreements rooted in different and often conflicting systems of moral understanding. These understandings are derived from belief systems that provide a source of identity, community, and purpose for those who adhere to them. The conflicts are reflected in ongoing debates about issues such as gay rights, reproductive freedom, race and gender and equity. The foundation of these debates is rooted in moral values; the basis by which individuals determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.

Living in a time when racial segregation is prohibited by law; a time when the journey on the long road from slavery and segregation has led many descendents of slaves into lives as prosperous American citizens, inner city youths who allow their identities to be defined by the media's commercialized

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images of African American will experience disadvantages in competing with others for the benefits that American institutions offer. Lacking engaging learning environments and access to rigorous instruction, many students in inner city schools are unable to relate their classroom experiences to preparation for future success.

For a significant number of African Americans, there are some confounding realities. African Americans have benefited from elimination of segregation. The advances since the 1960s have proceeded at an unprecedented pace. The African American community is now segmented economically, geographically and ideologically along class lines. Nearly one-fourth of African American families have incomes that are at or below the poverty level. One-third of this group resides in segregated and impoverished inner city communities. The post-*Brown* civil rights advances have done little to improve their economic and educational opportunities. Black families in inner city communities endure conditions that are, in many ways, as oppressive as those African Americans endured during the nadir of the segregation era. Their levels of unemployment are higher, their neighborhoods are more isolated and less safe and their educational opportunities have not improved.

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