

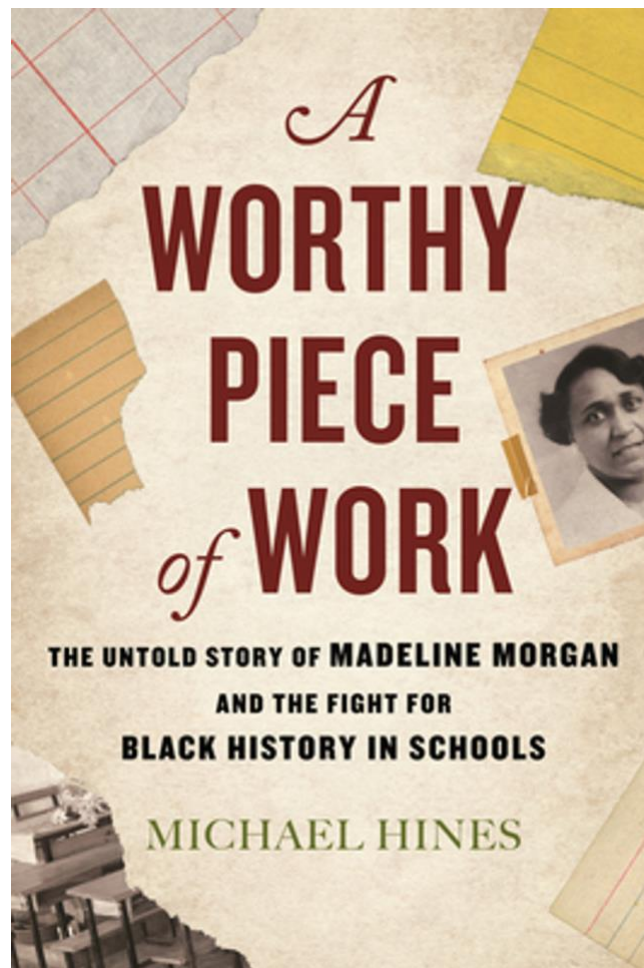
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Review

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

by Susan Klonsky



MICHAEL HINES. *THE UNTOLD STORY OF MADELINE MORGAN AND THE FIGHT FOR BLACK HISTORY IN SCHOOLS*. BOSTON: BEACON PRESS, 2022.

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Students of the history of education in Chicago know of the work of Carter G. Woodson, the great theorist and organizer who initiated "Black History Week" in Chicago in 1926. Woodson is generally recognized as the "father" of Black studies, and as the chief early advocate for celebrating the achievements and culture of African Americans in classrooms and communities. Woodson and the organization he established (the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History/known as ASNLH) fought for the inclusion of a fulsome appreciation of Black achievement into the preordained and highly centralized curricula of Chicago Public Schools and other school districts. Then as now, his work was met with resistance and was frequently diluted and ignored. Rarely are other educators acknowledged for the early efforts to expand, include, or correct the historical record presented to students.

Scholar Michael Hines has examined the long history of this battle through the work of Madeline Morgan, a Chicago teacher who receives scant credit for her efforts as an educator and organizer. Morgan deserves better, and Michael Hines has carefully examined the early efforts she led, along with hundreds of black women teachers and parents, to shine a bright light on the accomplishments of Black Americans, and to incorporate this content into the curricula of schools—particularly those serving Black children.

Over many decades of work with Chicago public schools, I confess I had never heard of Morgan (later known as Madeline Stratton Morris). I found no references to her work among several histories of the Chicago Public Schools or among seminal examinations of curricular theory. Morgan was not an academic, although she earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree at Northwestern and remained connected to various scholarly and research associations throughout her life. Her purpose was practical and urgent: to transform the education of Black children in the Chicago schools and the system that governed the curriculum, and to foster interracial and intercultural respect through education.

This book reveals the transformative leadership role of Chicago's Black women who served as librarians, teachers, mothers, and civic leaders. Most of these women arrived in Chicago in the first wave of the Great Migration, and were educated in Chicago, their social networks (in Morgan's case, her membership in Phi Delta Kappa—a national sorority of Black educators) proved a source of sustenance and influence beginning in the 1930s, offering national connections and recognition.

Why was Morgan basically ignored in the annals of Black studies and public education? Michael Hines offers:

Black schoolmen and especially school-women working at the primary and secondary levels were often relegated to a somewhat ancillary position in the Black history movement. A 1945 article...written by none other than

Carter G. Woodson makes this point more clearly. Woodson's piece, 'Negro Historians of Our Time,' surveys 'a number of Negroes who may properly be designated as modern historians,' lauding both the growth and the increasing professionalization of the field. Woodson concentrates on male academics, such as John Hope Franklin, Rayford Logan, and Luther P. Jackson.... Only toward the end of the piece does Woodson mention the work of Black teachers, noting that 'this story would not be complete' without the inclusion of "at least certain men and women..." (94).

Hines relays in meticulous detail the enormous number of meetings, conferences, and organizations in which Morgan participated, spoke, wrote, and organized over the course of her career, spanning 5 decades. (Often hyper-local in its mapping of her work, this book may be of greatest interest to Chicago historians).

But the crucial element was the force of character and vision which propelled Morgan to persuade her colleagues that the creation and acceptance of a curriculum was both essential and attainable. The project came to fruition as a series of curriculum guides adopted by the Chicago Board of Education, authored principally by Morgan and dryly titled "The Supplementary Units for the Course of Instruction in Social Studies." After prolonged negotiation and debate the Chicago Schools Superintendent and the Chicago Bureau of Curriculum adopted the Supplementary Units, and they began to be distributed in the spring of 1942.

The United States was at war. Social and civic unity were a serious priority, and the units represented an acknowledgement of deep-seated inequities not only in the resources available to schools serving Black children, but in the content of instruction. Morgan and her associates labored to ensure that graphic descriptions of the treatment of enslaved people and conditions under Jim Crow were included in the Supplementary Units. These are the same sorts of depictions which are being erased and censored in classrooms today in Florida and Texas for fear they may cause "discomfort" to white students. But in the 1940s, those most likely to be discomfited were the children of the Great Migration, newly arrived from the Black Belt South, for whom the memory of lynchings and Klan terror were all too fresh.

In 1943 riots broke out in several US cities, overwhelmingly initiated, Hines states, "by white mobs angry over Black economic and social gains" (100). Several popular publications theorized that Chicago remained peaceful in part because the schools were promoting greater racial "tolerance" and understanding. In late 1943, Los Angeles experienced what became known as the Zoot Suit riots, "as white servicemen from the surrounding base repeatedly descended onto Mexican American and African American neighborhoods intent on destruction and violence." In the aftermath, the assistant superintendent of the L.A. Public Schools wrote to Madeline Morgan: "Here in Los Angeles, with its tremendous Negro problem [*sic*], we have heard of your success in developing work units for children which reflect the achievement of the Negroes during the past two decades. We are very anxious to use your materials. May we have copies?" (103,104)

Over the ensuing decade, other districts followed suit, if only as window dressing to demonstrate some level of activity to cool things down. And as the war drew to a close and the urgency for intercultural cooperation waned, Morgan's work gradually fell into disuse. Indeed, hostility to school integration surged. In fall of 1944, the home of the Chicago Superintendent of Schools was attacked with a pack of dynamite. In the fall of 1945, only a month after the end of the war, hundreds of white high school students in Chicago's south side staged an "anti-Negro strike," refusing to go into school unless Black students were removed. Similar incidents arose in industrial cities in the Midwest where great numbers of new migrants had arrived during and immediately after World War II, seeking employment, housing, and education. By late 1945 the Supplementary Units were mostly disused except in Black schools.

The fight for full equality in the public schools of Chicago has taken many twists over the years since Morgan's day. The schools after Brown found new ways to enforce racial separation and to limit the options of Black children—even going so far as to confine children in Black neighborhoods to hundreds of "temporary" demountable classrooms in order to keep them within their defined attendance boundaries—and out of the white neighborhood schools. A 1980 consent decree set up magnet schools and other devices meant to promote integration but by 2009 the decree was set aside.

In ensuing decades, many initiatives sought to revivify and update the Black history curriculum and to weave it more fully into the social studies as well as all the domains of elementary and secondary education in Chicago. These curricular units come and go. (Indeed in 2019, the Chicago Public Schools adopted the study of the 1619 Project by Nikole Hannah-Jones in the high schools).

As we witness the renewed MAGA backlash against content that recognizes and celebrates Black arts, history, and literature, one wonders what Madeline Morgan and her sorors would have to say. Clearly, she would call us to persist in what she termed "this crucial war for democracy" (138). It's a fight that never ends.

Susan Klonsky is a Chicago writer and education activist. She is the co-author of *Sacred Ground: The Chicago Streets of Timuel Black* (Northwestern University Press, 2019).



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