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THE CULTURE WARS AND THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA'S AFRICAN
AMERICAN HISTORY MANDATE: 1980-2005

Ruby Schlaker
History 091: Senior Research Seminar
Robert Weinburg & Lisa Smulyan
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In February 2005, the School Reform Commission of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) convened and unanimously passed the “Resolution for African American Studies.” The resolution made Philadelphia the first and only district in the United States to mandate a year-long, African American history course as a graduation requirement. In the years since 2005, district-level mandates and requirements to, in some capacity, incorporate African American history into curricula have proliferated nationwide. Still, to date, Philadelphia is the only school district in the nation with a mandate to teach African American history (AAH) through the specific policy mechanism of a *mandated, year-long course required for graduation*.¹ Scholars of Educational Studies have crucially historicized the 2005 African American history mandate in its local, Philadelphia context. In contributing to this work, this paper undertakes a historiographical departure by exploring the ways in which ideologies proffered by the national-level culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s—specifically as they were fought on the terrain of teaching history—interacted with and were reflected in the Philadelphia context of the 2005 AAH mandate in question. Following an extensive review of the journalistic coverage of the context in which the mandate was implemented, I analyze a journalistic account that I consider representative of the interacting national-level culture wars and the Philadelphia context. As such, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: In what ways does the local, early 2000s, Philadelphia context filter the larger national-historical context of the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s? What does this reveal about the historical factors at play surrounding the 2005

¹ The closest another educational policy-making body has come to the Philadelphia model of a year-long course required for graduation took place just recently in New Jersey. In February 2021, Cherry Hill School District, a small, predominantly White district just across the NJ-PA state-line, mandated a *semester*-long African American history course for graduation. The curriculum for the term-long course is still being developed, and it has not yet reached classrooms. While this is both notable and hopeful, and indeed a rich site for future investigation, the potential implications of this highly reminiscent Cherry Hill mandate in relation to the Philadelphia mandate are discussed only in the concluding section of this paper; the focus of this paper remains the decades-long, local and national history that shaped the Philadelphia case.

origination of the only mandated, year-long course required for graduation in a public school district in the nation today?

Philadelphia and the Mandate: The Local Context

The 2001 State Takeover

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is a large, urban school district which, at the time of the 2005 "Resolution for African American Studies", served approximately 163,000 students. The largest racial/ethnic category of students in the district was (and today remains) African American—at the time comprising approximately sixty-one percent of the school body population. This group was followed by Hispanic students (approximately eighteen percent), Caucasian students (approximately thirteen percent), Asian students (approximately six percent), Native American students (0.2 percent), and "Other" students (1.6 percent). Seventy-six percent of SDP students in 2005 received free or reduced-fare lunch.²

In 2005, the School District of Philadelphia had been under the governance of the state of Pennsylvania for four years. Focus on and struggle to combat "student underachievement" in Philadelphia public schools characterized the educational reform context in the decades leading up to the takeover.³ By the 1990s, an ongoing struggle between the state and the district around how much funding should be allocated to the SDP to address this underachievement had emerged. When in 1998, then Superintendent David Hornbeck threatened to adopt an unbalanced budget if the state did not increase funding to Philadelphia despite the "ongoing (\$200 million plus) deficits in projected district budgets," the PA Legislature struck back and passed Act 46,

² Felicia C Sanders, "Curricular Policy Forty Years in the Making: The Implementation of an African American History Course in the Philadelphia School District." Order No. 3381000, The Pennsylvania State University, 2009.)
<https://proxy.swarthmore.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/curricular-policy-forty-years-making/docview/304981947/se-2?accountid=14194>, 62.

³ Sanders, "A Curricular Policy Forty Years in the Making," 91.

which would allow for a state takeover of “financially troubled school districts.”⁴ The following year, a public fallout took place between the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, high school students, community members, and Superintendent Hornbeck after his decision to “reconstitute,” or reorganize the school’s staff within, one of the city’s failing high schools, and damaged the “cohesiveness” of the SDP.⁵ In 2000, when the national political climate increasingly demanded accountability based on test scores and student scores remained stagnant under Hornbeck’s policies,⁶ the state legislature also passed the Education Empowerment Act. With this act, the state positioned itself to takeover any school district that did not increase standardized testing scores over three years. Reading this action as a threat that, without increased funding, the SDP would not be able to defend itself, Hornbeck stepped down. Shortly thereafter, in 2001, the state took over the district. At this moment, then, mistrust permeated the relational spaces not only between the community and the district, but also between the district and the state.

In 2002, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was signed into law by George W. Bush, creating a national policy climate characterized by the imposition of a relatively uniform set of “interventions” to the end of increasing student test scores. It is thus notable here that, on the national scale of educational policy, neither state takeovers, important curricular changes, nor the language of mandates in general were particularly unique to Philadelphia. In fact, as Useem argues, “in Philadelphia’s case, NCLB reinforced pre-existing state legislation that widened state prerogatives to intervene in distressed districts.”⁷

⁴ Sanders, 93.

⁵ Sanders, 94.

⁶ Sanders, 92-93.

⁷ Elizabeth Useem. “Learning from Philadelphia’s School Reform: The Impact of NCLB and related state legislation.” In *No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap*, ed. Alan Sadovnik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 297-321,1.

Led by Lieutenant Governor Mark Schweiker, then, the state temporarily replaced the SDP's school board and superintendent with a new governance structure. This was a five-member School Reform Commission (SRC)—with three members appointed by the Governor, and two by Philadelphia Mayor John F. Street—headed by a CEO of the district, Paul Vallas. Mayor Street appointed Sandra Dungee Glenn, who, backed by Vallas, became the leading policy actor in reinvigorating the fight for African American studies and ultimately in passing the 2005 resolution that is the focus of this paper. It was thus a narrow body of decision makers in the context of the state takeover that was ultimately responsible for passing the 2005 resolution, led by Dungee Glenn, a representative of Philadelphia in a moment when it had been deemed unable to cultivate its own educational success.

The Actors

Dungee Glenn began working to develop a “focused African and African American history course” in the early days of her appointment to the SRC.⁸ In doing so, she appealed to and garnered support of other historical actors in her networks on both district and community levels. This included her fellow SRC members, as well as organizations such as the Black Caucus, the NAACP and the Coalition of Education Advocates (CAE). The latter local organization collected “25,000 signatures requesting the implementation of an African American history *course* [emphasis added].”⁹ The CAE thus played an especially instrumental role in sparking discourse around and solidifying that demands for African American history be rooted in a specific course throughout the Philadelphia community at large. Molefi Kete Asante, the Philadelphia-based African American studies scholar credited with solidifying the theory of

⁸ Yulanda Essoka, “New Course Grew out of Years of Struggle,” Philadelphia Public School Notebook, 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071024200705/http://www.thenotebook.org/editions/2005/winter/newcourses.htm>.

⁹ Sanders, 94.

Afrocentricity, was featured in journalistic coverage as an outspoken voice in supporting the proposal for an AAH course.¹⁰ Many community members, including those represented by the independent volunteer journalist publication, the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, attended SRC meetings and planning sessions focused on initiatives surrounding this push for African American history. In 2003, tension surfaced between the community and leadership of the state-governed SDP after its decision to eliminate staff positions within its African American Studies Department due to “budget constraints.”¹¹ In response, the SDP leadership hired Dana King as the Lead Academic Coach for Social Studies and Cultural Studies, who has been credited as key in the development of the proposed course’s curriculum in the years leading up to the 2005 resolution.¹² That same year, the African and African Descent Curriculum and Instruction Reform Committee (AACIRC) and other groups staged a commemorative protest that criticized the District's failure to integrate African American studies into curriculum and called for more African American teachers.¹³ Thus, while the members of the SRC, led by Sandra Dungee Glenn, were the historical actors most directly involved in the 2005 resolution, it was a network of actors on both the district and community levels that played into the resolution’s development and enactment.

The Resolution

After multiple years of building community support and the development of a proposed curriculum for an African American history course, in February 2005 the School Reform Commission convened and unanimously passed the “Resolution for African American Studies.”

¹⁰ Nia Ngina Meeks, “Battle Ensues Over School Lessons; Activists Dissatisfied with Vallas' Efforts to Better Curriculums.” (Philadelphia Tribune, Mar 21, 2003.) <https://proxy.swarthmore.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/battle-ensues-over-school-lessons-activists/docview/337799784/se-2?accountid=14194>.

¹¹ Sanders, 96.

¹² Sanders, 97.

¹³ Sanders, 208.

The resolution on the whole is framed as a recommitment to the goal of the December 23, 1968 SDP resolution “to address the academic and cultural needs of [the SDP’s] African American students” through “a program of staff development on African Heritage and African-American History.”¹⁴ As a very clear extension of earlier approaches to this goal, the resolution set forth the first of six demands—to “infus[e]... African and African American history and culture in the total curriculum grades PreK-12.”¹⁵ In a divergence from earlier approaches, however, the resolution next instructs the district to “*mandate* an African and an African American History course in all Senior High Schools by September 2005”.¹⁶ The effect of this aspect of the resolution made this particular course a requirement for graduation. The 2005 resolution then specifies that the District is “resolved to” four other actions: to “close the academic achievement gap for all racial and ethnic subgroups”; to “diversify the teaching and leadership staff”; to “provide professional development on various teaching and learning styles that improve the educational attainment of African American children, particularly African American males”; and to address the “over representation of African American and Latino males in special education.”¹⁷

Yet, in the second of these six elements of the resolution, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) became the first and only school district in the U.S. to “mandate” an African American history course as a requirement for graduation.¹⁸ In the years following 2005, African American history has become a “common elective course” across many U.S. schools and school

¹⁴ The Notebook. “SRC Resolution for African American Studies.” *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. 2005.
<https://philadelphia.chalkbeat.org/2005/11/23/22185989/src-resolution-for-african-american-studies>.

¹⁵ The Notebook. “SRC Resolution for African American Studies.”

¹⁶ The Notebook. “SRC Resolution for African American Studies.”

¹⁷ The Notebook. “SRC Resolution for African American Studies.”

¹⁸ Sanders, 62.

districts.¹⁹ In clearer parallels to the first demand of the 2005 SRC resolution in question, Chicago and Minneapolis have created educational policies that require African American history to be taught across all grade levels. There has also been a wide proliferation of state-level “Black history mandates”—thirteen states have “passed laws requiring Black history be taught in public schools.”²⁰ These mandates are more variably aligned with the framing and demands of the 2005 SRC resolution, in that not all specify teaching African American history across all grade levels. Seven of the thirteen state mandates in question use oversight committees.²¹ Still, across all these recent mandates and requirements, the School District of Philadelphia remains the only school district in the U.S. today to specifically mandate a year-long African American history course as a requirement for graduation. This singular action in the national context is, importantly, much easier to trace. Since the graduating class of 2009 (the landmark set by policymakers in 2005 as the end of the piloting stage for the course), every tenth-grade student in the School District of Philadelphia has been enrolled in a year-long African American history course, which they must pass in order to graduate. While the ways in which African American history has been “infused” throughout the SDP curricula at all grade levels is more nebulous and difficult to track—as is likely true in national-context policies of the same model—the fact that every student has been enrolled in and passed the (tenth-grade) African American history course before graduating is a defined and traceable expression of the 2005 resolution.

Unsurprisingly, given its relative recency, the 2005 African American history mandate has not yet been historicized in the discipline of history. Scholars of educational studies have, however, importantly begun this work as they address the context of the curriculum mandate on

¹⁹ LaGarrett J King, “The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society,” (*Social Education* 81, no. 1. 2017, 14-18),

https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_810117014.pdf.

²⁰ King, “The Status of Black History,” 16.

²¹ King, 16.

the level of classroom implementation; notably, journalistic coverage of the mandate also incorporated historical context, though that will be addressed later in this paper. Rosemary Traoré's 2008 article, "More Than 30 Years Later: Intervention for African American Studies Required," though it was mainly written (save for the addition of a postscript written in June 2005), before the February 2005 mandate, does craft a historical-contextual narrative of the development of African American history curricula in Philadelphia, specifically in the 1960s and the 1990s and holds a specific focus on the development of Afrocentric perspectives throughout. She also focuses on the challenges of multi-ethnic implementational contexts—specifically those with both large African American and African student populations—that characterize some Philadelphia Public Schools where African American history curricula have been implemented. Traoré then poses potential solutions as rooted in an argument for an explicitly Afrocentric focus as an opportunity for solidarity-building, which must be necessarily backed by the "necessary fiscal and logistical resources."²²

Felicia Sanders, writing her 2009 dissertation on the implementation of the mandate in the few years just following its establishment, contributes perhaps the most thorough historical account of the decades leading up to the mandate. She distinguishes four relevant time frames in which the key events of the "historical, political, and educational context" of the mandate unfolded. Namely, Sanders focuses on the 1960s as an era characterized by Black "community control" of, or strong influence upon, school district policy;²³ the period of 1988 to 1995 for its focus on high school reform through a "learning communities" model of educational policy,

²² Rosemary Traoré, "More Than 30 Years Later: Intervention for African American Studies Required." (*Journal of Black Studies* 38, no. 4 2008), 663–678, 677.

²³ Sanders, 84-90.

coupled with increased Black political leadership in the city;²⁴ the period between 1994 and 2001 wherein Superintendent Hornbeck took up leadership of the SDP and placed a renewed emphasis on student underachievement and more interventionist policies, as discussed earlier in this paper; and finally 2001 to 2005 in which “the policy window [was] open” and the mandate was enacted under the state takeover.²⁵ In her historical accounts of all of these timeframes, Sanders importantly holds the agency and influence of Black students and community members as central. She also briefly discusses some multicultural educational theoretical perspectives on the purposes of teaching African American history.²⁶

Finally, Anita Chikkatur has also very briefly historicized the mandate to frame her 2015 article.²⁷ The article centers on a three-year ethnographic study of the class of a singular African-American history teacher in the SDP, which she began in the Fall of 2005 during the mandated course's earliest implementational stages. Chikkatur briefly alludes to the “fierce debate among politicians, parents, and pundits” in response to the mandate, but does not outline the ideological backings of this discourse. To the end of drawing conclusions about the ways in which the AAH curriculum played out on the ground, she also discusses the multicultural education literature on the teaching of AAH, including a discussion of Afrocentric approaches, though she does not historically contextualize the development of this literature within its preceding decades.

Here, I intervene to provide a historiographical perspective that integrates the ways in which the ideologies proffered by the national level culture wars of the 1980s and 90s,

²⁴ Wilson Goode became the city’s first Black mayor (1984-1992), Constance Clayton the first Black school superintendent (1983-1994), and Willie Williams the first Black police commissioner (1988-1992).

²⁵ Sanders, 94.

²⁶ Sanders, 135.

²⁷ Anita Chikkatur, “Teaching and Learning African American History in a Multiracial Classroom.” (*Theory and research in social education* 41, no. 4. 2013, 514–534.

specifically as they were fought on the terrain of teaching history, were filtered through and shaped the Philadelphia context of the 2005 resolution for African American studies.

The Culture Wars and the National Historical Context: 1980-1995

Capturing the nation's attention in the decades preceding the mandate, the culture wars were a dramatic struggle between "liberal, progressive, and secular Americans" and "their conservative, traditional, and religious counterparts."²⁸ This struggle approached a wide variety of "cultural" debates, in which conservatives and liberals fought bitterly over opportunities to define spaces of cultural production, or "the soul of America"²⁹—including art, film and television media, university curricula, and of course, public schools—according to the parameters of their fundamentally divergent perceptions of American culture. Conservatives of the 1980s and 90s viewed American culture as "something that, once whole, had been lost."³⁰ Especially in the aftermath of the countercultural, revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and its aftereffects, conservatives believed, culture desperately needed to be restored to the values that characterized the 1950s. This was the only way to save the America they loved.

Liberals, on the other hand, did not resist but rather saw American culture *through* the lens of the 1960s and its values of critical awareness. This guided liberals to an understanding of American culture as something that had always been fractured; to them, there was no unified, utopian American culture within American history to be reaching back to, let alone celebrating. In fact, liberals understood the critical processes of the 1960s as having left "American culture a closer approximation" of its not yet achieved "ideal form."³¹ These divergent views of culture were seamlessly mapped onto a divide over "whether the purpose of American history was to

²⁸ Andrew Hartman. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 7.

²⁹ Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 1.

³⁰ Hartman, 6.

³¹ Hartman, 6.

make Americans proud of the nation's glorious past or to encourage citizens to reflect on its moral failings."³² A range of ideologies, including the Christian Right, Traditionalism, Multiculturalism, and Afrocentrism all featured in the discourse surrounding this schism over the purpose of American history, nuancing the conservative-liberal divide over the definition of American culture. A core factor by which these ideologies differed was the degree to which they were committed to an American project about, as Hartman defines it, "how people from any racial or ethnic background could conform to American culture based on common ideals as opposed to common ancestry."³³ Straddling both ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum, neither the Christian Right nor Afrocentric ideologies were fully committed to such a project, given that it was at odds with their identity-based, relatively separatist political values.

Defined as a powerful political alliance by 1980, when it helped elect Ronald Reagan president, the Christian Right operated from the "assumption that an increasingly secular government represented the gravest threat to Christian values,"³⁴ including state-run schools. The most conservative representatives of this camp thus took up the separatist mantle of educational privatization. In private schools, they could continue to define American history as inextricably linked to, and supportive of, a theory of Christian cosmology and "family values" among those (overwhelmingly White Americans) who had already bought into such an ideology, effectively forgoing the American project.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, though intersecting on the grounds of its resistance to the American project, was Afrocentricity. An outgrowth of the Black Power Movement, Afrocentricity was formally theorized by Philadelphia-based African American studies scholar Molefi Kete Asante. Afrocentricity prioritized the definition and propagation of African

³² Hartman, 6.

³³ Hartman, 265.

³⁴ Hartman, 72.

American culture by and for African Americans, and to this end “rooted black American culture squarely in African history instead of American or European history.”³⁵ This claim to African American subjectivity was considered an epistemic necessity to counter the “academic ‘objectivity’” that Afrocentrists understood to be, in reality, “a kind of collective subjectivity of European culture.”³⁶ “Objectivity,” in this view, repositioned African American history and culture on the bottom of the sociocultural hierarchy when it conceded to the American project of cultural conformity. An Afrocentric-defined American history portrayed individual African Americans as “cultural legatees of a once proud African civilization” in the American context.³⁷ Thus, in epistemically redefining African Americans as historical agents, rather than predominantly as objects of enslavement at the hands of white oppressors, an Afrocentric American history was valued for its political potential to empower African American people on self-determined, identity-based terms outside of the American project.³⁸ In terms of disseminating this Afrocentric American history, Afrocentrists created “ethnocentric” schools within public school districts in Miami, Baltimore, Detroit, Milwaukee, and New York throughout the 1990s.³⁹

Multiculturalism, a more middle approach, on the other hand, conceived of America as “redeemable, if flawed.”⁴⁰ As Spring contextualizes, Multiculturalism emerged as a way to conceptualize American diversity in the face of demographic shifts of the populace at large and in its influential political entities during the 1960s. At the same time that the 1965 Immigration

³⁵ Hartman, 126.

³⁶ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). Quoted in Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 126.

³⁷ Hartman, 127.

³⁸ Hartman, 127.

³⁹ Joel Spring, “The Great Civil Rights Movement and the New Culture Wars.” (In *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, 130-158. Routledge, 2016), 133.

⁴⁰ Hartman, 265.

Act ushered in a new wave of immigration from a variety of non-European nations, “Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans were demanding a place for their cultures,”⁴¹ and specifically a place in public school curricula. Multiculturalism sought to concurrently celebrate all the racial and ethnic cultures of the United States, and thus believed American history should accordingly represent past and present national diversity. Taking advantage of the diverse foci of social and cultural historical methodology emerging in the 1980s and 90s, Multiculturalists backed a revised, horizontally diversified conception of American history. This could be used, then, as a tool to critically engage with the nation’s past and present, and more closely approximate an ideal American culture, equated with a more unified version of its component parts. However, Hartman explains, “[M]ulticulturalism was more about representing diversity than about challenging institutional hierarchy”—a hierarchy that critics of Multiculturalism, such as Afrocentrists, would point out is implicit in most, even critical versions of, the American project.⁴² As such, in the context of educational reform, it “appealed to a wider array of teachers and allowed it to become the implicit ethos of the national curriculum.”⁴³

Whether Multiculturalism should happen on just the level of the curriculum, or whether it should pervade students’ education in the broadest sense, constituted a notable divide among theorists in the movement for multicultural education. The latter argument delineated that all students should become multilingual, and therefore able to communicate across multiple ethnic groups; that all students should study different cultural perspectives; and that diversity-emphasizing principles of “Multiculturalism” should be integrated into the “general life of the school”—that is, everywhere that socio-cultural information was being disseminated, including bulletin boards, lunch rooms, and assemblies. Alongside the development of more

⁴¹ Spring, “The Great Civil Rights Movement,” 133.

⁴² Hartman, 203.

⁴³ Hartman, 203.

critical pedagogies throughout the 1990s, including culturally-relevant pedagogy,⁴⁴ the debates around multicultural education also evolved to include a strand over whether the purpose of multicultural education should be to empower oppressed people, or—more aligned with the national, culture wars-defined Multiculturalism—to create national unity by teaching common cultural values.⁴⁵ In the former aspect of this strand of the debate, the empowerment of oppressed groups was both linked to and valued equally with cultivating national unity. Those in the latter camp, however, considered the prioritization of oppressed groups counterproductive to the sense of equality necessary for all students to buy into a common culture. In other words, this latter camp was relatively less concerned with the redistribution of epistemic and political power to the ends of creating national unity, and more concerned with creating an ethos of equality through a “colorblind” approach to diversity.⁴⁶ As representative of a broader trend in educational theory and practice, implementation of this former approach, either on the policy or classroom-level, generally lagged behind its theoretical origins.

Multiculturalism also clashed with another ideological approach to American history committed to the American project: Traditionalism. Despite some overlap in Traditionalism’s ethos of loose but persistent alignment with American Christianity, its commitment to relatively secular, “neo-conservative” governmental structures distinguished the ideology from the Christian Right.⁴⁷ More than its links to religion, Traditionalist conceptions of American history reflected alarms sounded, mostly by conservatives, around the threat to national unity in the face of both the Cold War and the sentiment that “America was losing its economic lead over the rest

⁴⁴ Gloria Ladson-Billings. “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: Aka the Remix.” (Harvard educational review 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.)

⁴⁵ Spring, 133.

⁴⁶ E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (2nd ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁴⁷ Linda Symcox, *Whose History?: The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms*. (New York: Teachers College, 2002), 1-8.

of the world.”⁴⁸ This climate, they believed, called for renewed and unwavering patriotism. Thus, Traditionalist American history was rooted in the belief that the canonical narrative of American history is overwhelmingly composed of facts—“certain eternal truths,” such as the idea that “America was a beacon of freedom embodied in the great men of the American past such as George Washington.”⁴⁹ Multiculturalism's revisionist, more critical methodological bent was, by contrast, painted as a threat to the potential for history to “inculcate a love of country.”⁵⁰ What was meant by this, really, was a love of a specific country—one less that looked less like the rapidly changing racial and ethnic demographics of the nation, and more approximate to the “once whole” American culture of the past, shaped by a more racially and ethnically homogenous group of cultural arbiters. To garner support for their view of American history, then, Traditionalists turned to inflammatory discourse that conflated Multiculturalism with Afrocentrism.⁵¹

A crucial site where this range of ideological conceptions around the purpose of American history, and its corresponding definition of American culture, played out was in public school curricula. This already intensifying debate vortexed around the development and publication of the *National History Standards* in 1994. As Symcox details, a “climate of bipartisan collaboration” surrounded and produced the project. At a 1989 summit of governors from all fifty states, called by the George H.W. Bush administration to address the “perceived national educational crisis,” the governors developed the National Education Goals.⁵² These goals held at their core a need for national achievement standards, including those for history,

⁴⁸ Symcox, *Whose History?*, 162.

⁴⁹ Hartman, 276.

⁵⁰ Hartman, 276.

⁵¹ Hartman, 265.

⁵² Symcox, 9.

and the bipartisan call for standards was again reified in 1991 with the congressional passage of Bush's America 2000 Act, and then again by Clinton's Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

It was in this political climate that, in 1992, Lynne V. Cheney, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Diane Ravitch, Assistant Secretary of Educational Research and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education, spearheaded the thirty-two month long project to create the National History Standards. Cheney seemingly undertook the project with the belief that, while her conservative view of culture may face some compromises given the bipartisan nature of the collaboration, she had selected project leaders that would "hold the middle ground" between Multiculturalism and Traditionalism, generally satisfying the conservative educational reform agenda.⁵³ Leaders Charlotte Crabtree and Gary Nash were, however, historians and educators by professional training, and therefore "followed their own historical instincts," towards the most recent disciplinary trends of "social history and new world history."⁵⁴ Such trends leaned clearly towards the liberal definition of American culture—culture as fractured and with the potential to be approximated in its ideal form through a more self-critical version of American history. After reading the curricula the Crabtree and Nash produced, then, Cheney launched a campaign virulently attacking the very project she had begun, condemning the content of the *Standards* as representative of a "crisis in the humanities."⁵⁵

An eighteen-month controversy rooted in a "debate over *what* history— and more importantly, *whose* history—should be taught in the schools," thus ensued.⁵⁶ The controversy finally culminated with the 1995, non-binding U.S. Senate resolution to formally condemn the *National Standards for History* and cut off all future funding to the organization that oversaw its

⁵³ Symcox, 163.

⁵⁴ Symcox, 163.

⁵⁵ Symcox, 157.

⁵⁶ Symcox, 2.

development. The resolution, passed by a vote of 99 to 1, designated the standards to an “un-American”—specifically for lacking “decent respect for the contributions of Western civilization, and United States history”—and therefore an unusable position.⁵⁷ The conservatives never got to fulfill their originally intended educational reform agenda through a set of history standards, and while the *Standards* did reach some schools, the liberals who covertly shaped them did not get to see their full vision for a Multicultural, national curriculum to fruition either. Through this public debate in which their Traditionalist view of history won out over a more Multicultural view, however, the conservative, “once whole” but now “lost” definition of culture was reified in a federal government context,⁵⁸ and, given the widespread media attention the debate received, in American society at large. Both the debate over the *National History Standards*, as well as the divergent views of American history and culture that shaped the culture wars from which it was born, formed a crucial part of the broader, national historical context in which the 2005 “Resolution for African American Studies,” including its stipulation for a specific course mandated as a graduation requirement, was formed. As illustrated in the section to follow, along the ideological spectrum defined by the culture wars, the resolution and the ideas that shaped its formation fall somewhere between Multiculturalism and Afrocentricity.

The Mandate and Ideologies of the Culture Wars

Documentation of the Mandate

As previously mentioned, the SDP African American history mandate can be considered a direct, material result of the unanimous vote by the School Reform Commission to pass the “Resolution on African American Studies.” The SRC meetings leading up to, and in which the resolution was passed, then, seems an extremely fruitful context for historical investigation—as

⁵⁷ Symcox, 1.

⁵⁸ Hartman, 6.

the language of the commission members or other actors in attendance, and/or any other factors that may have shaped the social environment of the meetings—may provide a more nuanced understanding of how the resolution was passed. Hoping to access first-hand documentation of these meetings, then, I submitted a formal, Right-to-Know-Law request to the SDP in January 2022 for the, “Agendas and meeting minutes from... meetings of the School District of Philadelphia’s School Reform Commission in the years: 2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004, 2004-2005, 2005-2006.” Shortly thereafter, I received the first of multiple emails notifying me that the “agency may invoke an extension of time to respond,” as “permitted by Section 902(a) of the RTKL... because the extent or nature of the request precludes a response within the required time period.” After the thirty-day period which the District had granted itself as an extension had passed, I contacted the Open Records Officer; in response, the District granted itself another extension of fourteen days. After these fourteen days had elapsed, I again contacted the Open Records Officer and heard nothing in response. I have since contacted the Office again, and still have heard nothing.

Whether it was the “extent or nature” of my request for the SRC meeting minutes remains unknown. Given that the journalistic coverage of the mandate never features quotations from the SRC meetings themselves, however, may afford cause to believe that such documentation has always been informally, though strategically, closed to public access, despite the fact that many SRC meetings were open to attendance by community members at the time. It also seems to me an unlikely coincidence that there is no underlying reason other than bureaucratic inefficiency that the only formal documentation surrounding what is one of the most contentious events in SDP history seems to have been kept private to date, even some seventeen years after the 2005 resolution was implemented.

Given the inaccessibility of primary source documentation of the SRC meetings, this paper relies instead on the considerable documentation of the African American history mandate by a variety of journalistic sources, including the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Tribune* (the oldest continuously published African American newspaper in the nation), and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. While entailing a considerable amount of digging through relatively poorly maintained internet archives, I was able to conduct a review of this diverse coverage and, for the analysis to follow, choose and research the journalistic context of an article that I consider representative of the main ideologies that shaped the formation of the mandate. The ideas within the article reflect an ideological combination of Afrocentricity and Multiculturalism and can, in this way, also be interpreted to represent the way the national, culture wars context was filtered through the local particularities of the Philadelphia context.

The Mandate in Journalism

Given its relative proximity to the historical actors who experienced the material impacts of the mandate—including but not limited to parents, educators, and local, educational-advocacy community organizers—the *Philadelphia Public School Notebook's* coverage of the mandate provides a unique and crucial account. In 2005, the *Notebook* was entering its eleventh year of independent, non-profit journalism, and stood alone in the ecosystem of Philadelphia media as a publication that focused solely on covering the Philadelphia Public School district. Founded in 1994 by “a group of concerned parents, teachers, and community members committed to improving public education,”⁵⁹ the *Notebook* was born as, and remained, a community-organized news source. Its eleven-person editorial board, which “plan[ned], edit[ed], and wr[ote] articles for each issue of the *Notebook*” was integrated in the Philadelphia Public School community in

⁵⁹ The Notebook. “About Us.” Philadelphia Public School Notebook. n.d. <https://web.archive.org/web/20051029230857/http://www.thenotebook.org/about/>.

diverse and sometimes overlapping ways. Four members of the board were then current or retired School District of Philadelphia (SDP) teachers; three were SDP parents; three were educational journalists; five were involved in local educational non-profit work as community organizers or, more generally, “public school advocates.” The latter two in this category of editorial board members were generally engaged in relatively left-leaning work. Also notably, the *Notebook* (and consequently, the leadership and editorial boards behind it) distributed the majority of its physical copies free of charge throughout “each Philadelphia public school and Free Library branch as well as through over 280 community organizations.”⁶⁰ This elucidates not only the general audience for which the *Notebook* was written, but also that its audience reflected the backgrounds of the volunteer editorial board. The *Notebook*, then, was written both by and for, and therefore heavily shaped by, a somewhat left-leaning extension of the SDP community.

It is this journalistic context that shaped the publication of Yulanda Essoka’s *Notebook* article, “New Course Grew out of Years of Struggle.”⁶¹ Published in the “Winter 2005-06 Edition,” Essoka’s article captured a glimpse of the historical moment just approaching one year after the 2005 resolution was passed. It crafts a narrative around the development, passage, and responses to the resolution as centered around SRC member Sandra Dungee Glenn, and heavily features her voice through direct quotes. Glenn’s language, it must be noted, was itself selected and shaped by Essoka, and by extension the left-leaning, community-centered *Notebook*. That said, Glenn’s narrative and rhetoric reflects the ways in which the ideological history of the culture wars—and its corresponding conception of the purpose of history, and teaching history—can be pulled as part of a historical throughline between the events of a decade earlier and the local, Philadelphia context in which the 2005 resolution took shape.

⁶⁰ The Notebook. “About Us.”

⁶¹ Essoka, “New Course Grew out of Years of Struggle.”

On one hand, the Afrocentric ideological thread is clear. Essoka explains that Dungee Glenn was motivated to reignite the fight to implement African American studies on two interacting levels—that of her constituency (the broader community of Philadelphia), and that of her personal, lived experience. To frame this, Essoka notes that contemporary “pressure and protests from community activists” had been building,⁶² backed by demands rooted in the unfulfilled nature of promises unkept since the SDP’s first commitment to “infus[ing] African American history throughout the curriculum” following student protests in the 1960s.⁶³ The “incendiary climate” these students created, Essoka clearly states, was an expression of their “desire to affirm their *cultural identities* [emphasis added].”⁶⁴ As an African American graduate of the Philadelphia public school Girls High, her constituency’s renewal of identity-based demands to self-define culture especially resonated with Dungee Glenn. She recounts her personal story of “being frustrated in high school when—no matter what the subject—little was included in class discussions about people who looked like her.”⁶⁵ In visiting schools in her SRC role, Essoka notes, Dungee Glenn saw herself reflected in the students, and is quoted as saying “not much seemed to have changed.”⁶⁶

Dungee Glenn, then—far from shying away from her personal experiences as a Philadelphia native, African American woman to the ends of cultivating some kind of “objective” stance—instead centered her personal lived experiences as an asset to her argument for taking action to more substantively implement AAH in SDP classrooms. Glenn’s implied emphasis on the importance of her subjectivity in leading the charge to create this implementation of AAH provides evidence of Afrocentric ideology of the culture wars in

⁶² Essoka.

⁶³ Essoka.

⁶⁴ Essoka.

⁶⁵ Essoka.

⁶⁶ Essoka.

practice, as filtered through the Philadelphia context. A central tenet of Afrocentricity was to ensure that African Americans, as opposed to any other racial or ethnic subgroup of Americans, be the ones to define and propagate their version of American culture; their subjectivity was necessarily central to this process, for danger that it might be subsumed by Eurocentric “objectivity.”

Dungee Glenn’s response to the outspoken minority arguments against positioning African American history over that of other groups, also highlights her acknowledgement of a Eurocentric “objectivity,” and the corresponding necessity to assert an African American subjectivity. As Essoka put it, “Dungee Glenn maintain[ed] that just because the District’s world and American history courses are not named for particular racial groups does not mean they are not also racialized.”⁶⁷ The unstated implication here is that, as the record of Dungee Glenn’s personal and constituency-based experiences within the SDP following the 1968 protests and demands to integrate African American history into the broader curriculum showed, “the District’s world and American history courses” held a bias towards White, European knowledge and history. The potential for African American history to be portrayed through an African American subjectivity in these broader framings of history, those which reflected a commitment to the American project, had to be abandoned if epistemic power were to ever actually be redistributed, and the proposed corresponding success of oppressed students was to ever actually be realized.

It is well worth noting again here that, not only was Molefi Kete Asante a massively influential figure on the national scale in the development and defense of Afrocentricity during the culture wars, he was also based in Philadelphia and was an outspoken proponent of creating an African American history course for the SDP. Additionally, as Sanders has noted, Asante was

⁶⁷ Essoka.

directly involved in the development of the course in its early stages, as he met twice monthly with instructors from pilot schools teaching the course before 2005 to work together on curricular revisions based on their successes and challenges. In neither Essoka's article, nor in other journalistic accounts that I have reviewed, does Dungee Glenn reference Asante as an influence on her ideas around the required African American history course. The reason for this can only be speculated upon, though it seems possible that Dungee Glenn may have considered it strategic to distance herself from such a contentious figure as Asante while speaking about the controversial AAH course, despite the fact that their presence in the same space of the SDP was no well-guarded secret. What seems more certain, however, given Asante's outspoken presence on the national, Philadelphia-local, and SDP-level, is that Asante had some ideological influence on Dungee Glenn. Asante can therefore be considered a key player in the historical throughline between the culture wars of a decade earlier, and the actors that shaped the 2005 resolution.

Overall, it is clear that, in her efforts that shaped the 2005 "Resolution for African American Studies," Dungee Glenn was certainly committed to challenging power imbalance through challenging institutional hierarchy. As such, her Afrocentric-leaning ideological stance is one in rather clear contrast with the centrist version of Multiculturalism focused on representing, rather than critically questioning the power undergirding diversity in America, represented in the culture wars and the debates over the *National History Standards*. The very fact that Dungee Glenn pursued such a project of a required African American history course within a school district that was not entirely (though was predominantly) African American, might still be interpreted, however, as consistent with the liberal view of American culture as situated within the American project and therefore with more critical theorists of multicultural education that stood at the fringes of the Multicultural rhetoric of the culture wars. Dungee Glenn did not

propose the course, after all, as a replacement for American or world history already represented in the curriculum. Rather, she considered it one among the potential for multiple, necessary additions to the curriculum, including histories of other local racial and ethnic groups. Also, in specifically addressing how the course was relevant to non-African American students, Essoka directly quotes Dungee Glenn's argument that "there is a need to be 'honest with children and honest in education.' And, in the past... the School District of Philadelphia has presented 'misinformation and outright lies.'"⁶⁸ One might interpret Dungee Glenn's commitment to "honest" history to be aligned with the liberal view of the purpose of American history as reified by Multiculturalists of the national culture wars—a purpose that was critically revisionist, to the ends of healing an always fractured, but still imaginable, cultural unity through understanding and learning from the moral failings of the past.

Finally, as Essoka concludes her article, she includes a penultimate direct quote from Dungee Glenn that can also be interpreted as Multicultural-leaning: "This course," the quote reads, "will get more scrutiny to make sure that it's accurate and not about *self-promotion* [emphasis added]."⁶⁹ Dungee Glenn's language here implies a reassurance that the required course is not *necessarily* linked to an agenda of identity-based pathways to epistemic or material superiority, especially not over other ethnic or racial groups. This small but notable turn of phrase is a rather stark divergence from her previous, identity-based argumentation that centered the AAH class as an unqualified good for its ability to support the achievement of African American students. As such, Dungee Glenn's language may be considered placating rhetoric in response to those opponents of the mandated course concerned with potential divisiveness among racial/ethnic groups in projects of multicultural education. More specifically, Dungee

⁶⁸ Essoka.

⁶⁹ Essoka.

Glenn may have considered this language especially strategic given an understanding of the fear-based responses that frequently surrounded Afrocentric-leaning ideologies. Taken together, then, Dungee Glenn's ideas and actions that shaped the development of the 2005 "Resolution for African American Studies" can be seen as representative of both Multicultural and Afrocentric ideologies of the national historical context of the culture wars, as filtered through the particular Philadelphia context.

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

The national historical context of the 2005 "Resolution for African American Studies"—wherein the culture wars were fought on the terrain of the purpose of history, and vortexed around the debates over the *National History Standards*—had recently shown that projects to change history curricula had the potential to be a site of great contention. As demonstrated by the analysis above, Sandra Dungee Glenn and the other historical actors that shaped the 2005 resolution, and specifically its inclusion of a required African American history course, proffered Philadelphia-specific versions of the ideologies of this larger historical context. These ideologies interacted in such a way that the 2005 resolution may be considered a unique move in the context of the history of both Afrocentric and multicultural educational policies; it was a more pluralistic, if not fundamentally divergent action from the original, more separatist aims of Afrocentricity, and at the same time, a more singularly-focused agenda than most policies aligned with Multiculturalism.

While outside of the scope of this paper, a potentially generative extension of this analysis might investigate whether the actors involved in the 2005 resolution, such as Dungee Glenn, actively shaped their rhetoric and its ideological backings to strategically avoid the missteps that prevented compromise and substantive action in the recent history of the culture

wars. While the 2005 event unfolded more so on the grounds of the differences between Multiculturalism and Afrocentricity, rather than between Multiculturalism and Traditionalism in the debates over the *National History Standards*, it seems arguable that the Philadelphia actors more successfully fused these differing ideologies to affect material change in history curricula. It also seems possible that—informed by a recent, national-level historical understanding of the difficulty of creating the convergence of interests necessary for curriculum change—the Philadelphia actors’ recognized the uncommon nature of an opportunity to substantively implement an AAH course, and accordingly, decided to make it a more permanent, visible policy: a graduation requirement.

In following this line of inquiry, questions may arise on a larger, policy-making scale, such as: (a) What do the culture wars in relation to the 2005 resolution reveal about the difficulty of compromise towards the middle of an ideological spectrum, versus between the middle and its neighboring fringes?, and (b) What does this investigation reveal about the frequency with which, and the character of, substantive changes when they originate from more separatist versus more compromise-oriented sites of ideological spectra?

Conclusion

A reinvestigation and historicization of Philadelphia’s 2005 “Resolution for African American Studies” is timely in the context of recent attacks on teaching non-traditional histories in public schools. Following multiple waves of the Black Lives Matter movement throughout the 2010s and in the summer of 2020, alongside increasing prevalence of African American and Ethnic studies in public schools across the nation, conservatives at multiple levels of government nationwide have, in recent years, launched attacks on social studies curricula that represent “Critical Race Theory” (CRT). Critical Race Theory originated in academia, and specifically

grew out of a framework for legal analysis that emphasized the socially-constructed, structural nature of racism as “embedded in legal systems and policies.”⁷⁰ This is quite divergent from the way it has been operationalized by conservatives in the policymaking context in recent years; by their definition, CRT is a “catchall”⁷¹ for “education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics.”⁷² Especially in the penultimate of these characteristics, it is evident that attacks on CRT are the contemporary iteration of a now cyclical contention around the purpose of American history, one that played out forty years earlier in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Legislation to ban elements of curricula purportedly aligned with CRT has been introduced and implemented to varying extents across the nation, including in the state of Pennsylvania.⁷³

While no legislative action to change the SDP’s history curriculum has yet been taken, this may be considered an especially tenuous moment for the district’s mandated African American history course. Yet, in the face of such an uncertain national and state-level political context, the SDP’s social studies curriculum specialist, Ishmael Jimenez, alongside a group of passionate educators, have publicly committed to revamping the AAH curriculum to more fully, humanly depict the African American experience as well as to teach more about the connections

⁷⁰ Stephen Sawchuk, “What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack?,” *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., May 18, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>.

⁷¹ Dale Mezzacappa, “Philadelphia Is Updating Its Mandated African American History Course,” *Chalkbeat Philadelphia* (Chalkbeat, March 8, 2022), <https://philadelphia.chalkbeat.org/2022/3/8/22967115/philadelphia-public-schools-african-american-history-course-update-critical-race-theory?fbclid=IwAR0Rj-ftKUMyr8UIoPOSwrfVV0zILB yt5aZ8QhcoFyHKJfrWfEibqU7vYvM>.

⁷² Thomas Wilburn and Cathryn Stout, “CRT Map: Efforts to Restrict Teaching Racism and Bias Have Multiplied Across the U.S.,” *Chalkbeat* (Chalkbeat, February 1, 2022), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism>.

⁷³ Wilburn and Stout, “CRT Map.”

between history and contemporary systemic racism.⁷⁴ The latter element, while educators do not identify it this way—perhaps in a strategic parallel to the couched Afrocentric-leaning language used by Dungee Glenn around the 2005 resolution—is in fact a relatively close approximation of the implementation of some aspects of CRT in practice. Those leading the charge, however, seem well-aware of the potential challenges they may face. This is evidenced, for example, in the mission statement of the SDP educator-comprised, Philadelphia Black History Collaborative—to “*preserv[e]* and enhanc[e] the teaching of Black history in the city of Philadelphia [emphasis added].”⁷⁵ In 2005, the SDP context in which the original, year-long African American history course mandated for graduation was formed, was characterized by both a local climate of relative mistrust and tension following the state takeover, as well as a national climate of lingering contention around the purpose of American history, as a result of the only recently quelled culture wars. Today, educators and other local actors again face a similarly uncertain, if not more threatening state-level and national climate surrounding the purposes of American history and, by extension, the ability to uphold the SDP’s mandated AAH course. And, once again, Philadelphia actors have confirmed that bold and strategic curricular action, even that which may evoke the tenets of the Critical Race Theory, is their response in climates of threatening uncertainty.

The contemporary context also differs in another hopeful way—the SDP has very recently been joined by two other educational policies that have made non-traditional histories a graduation requirement, likely inspired by the now seventeen-year long Philadelphia model. Although not a program for African American studies, in 2021, California notably passed a state-wide, semester-long ethnic studies graduation requirement, to be implemented over the

⁷⁴ Dale Mezzacappa, “Philadelphia Is Updating Its Mandated African American History Course.”

⁷⁵ Philadelphia Black History Collective (@BlackHistoryPHL). 2022. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/blackhistoryphl>.

upcoming years for the graduating class of 2029-2030.⁷⁶ Also in 2021, one small, majority White school district in New Jersey—Cherry Hill, just across the NJ-PA state line from Philadelphia—created a semester-long, mandated African American history course. These graduation requirement-model actions are just a few of many differently shaped, though similarly bold curricular policy actions nationwide,⁷⁷ even in the face of conservative threats—policy actions that may also be in some way inspired the bold sensibility of Philadelphia’s early precedent. If this trend continues, it seems likely that the influence of the SDP’s approximately six decades-long struggle around its African American history course—led by student activists, teachers, community organizers, policy makers, and others, beginning in the 1960s and extending until today—will continue to grow far beyond its Philadelphia roots, and into a network of those committed to imagining and enacting the liberatory potential of history and education nationwide.

⁷⁶ This was a victory following years of struggle and that played out in the geopolitical context of a ban on ethnic studies in nearby Arizona, which has been held since 2012.

⁷⁷ Wilburn and Stout, “CRT Map.”

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