



SPECIAL FOCUS: SPOTLIGHT ON PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Middle East Studies Under Occupation: The Case of Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

A key component of Middle East Studies methodology is to identify and deconstruct the relationship between knowledge about the region and the power structures that give knowledge meaning. Typically, that methodology is applied to Middle East Studies at the post-secondary level. This paper applies that methodology to public schools in Washington, D.C. Through structural analysis, I will tease out the “epistemological commitments” (Abu El Haj 2001) of what the government of Washington, D.C. calls “social studies learning standards” -- short sentences which “detail the knowledge students are expected to acquire at a particular grade level.” Based on my experience teaching the Middle East in a Washington, D.C. public high school, I also raise questions about the relationship between the content standards and teachers’ work conditions, and whether such conditions support or inhibit the development of a praxis (Freire 2016) which could deconstruct US colonialism inside American public schools. One goal of this paper is to bring Middle East Studies into conversation with American Studies, broadly defined, and in particular ethnographic studies of DC that consider the colonial relationship between the US Government and Washingtonians. I conclude by calling for a deeper engagement with the American public school system by Middle East Studies scholars at both a theoretical and practical level

Keywords: Middle East Studies methodology; Orientalism; antiblackness; Pedagogy; Public Education

One strength of Modern Middle East Studies is the field’s concern with representation, knowledge production, and the relationship between knowledge and power. Typically, scholars address these concerns in relation to higher education, peer-reviewed scholarship, and popular mass media.¹ In this paper, I

¹ Nadia Abu El Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The*

extend our field's boundaries by offering an ethnographically informed textual and structural analysis of how public high school curricula in Washington, D.C., represent the Middle East. In the process, I bring Middle East Studies into conversation with American Studies, broadly defined, and in particular with ethnographic studies of Washington, D.C., that consider the colonial relationship between the U.S. government and Washingtonians.²

Curricula hold value for scholars because they depict what the state considers valid knowledge. Consequently curricula help us to understand what Nadia Abu El Haj calls the state's "epistemological commitments": facts held to be self-evident which structure scientific inquiry.³ Unearthing epistemological commitments enables us to respond to Edward Said and examine the relationship between Orientalism and pedagogy.⁴ For if the Middle East scholar is tasked with bringing students into a critical dialogue with what they know, then it is important for us to examine what these students know to begin with, who curated their knowledge, and what commitments – epistemological and otherwise – those parties maintain. Put differently, until we know what our students know, we will not know how to best engage them in the process of discovery – both of themselves, as human beings, and of the world around them. Given the centrality of the Middle East to American policies and empire, and the need for social science education to help people take informed civic action, what high schoolers learn about the Middle East should be of interest both to educators at secondary and post-secondary levels and to policymakers whose decisions should be subject to democratic consent and oversight.

To address this line of inquiry, I focus on a document that contains what the local government of Washington, D.C., calls "social studies learning standards" – short sentences which "detail the knowledge students are expected to acquire at a particular grade level."⁵ The epistemological commitment underpinning the DC standards is to "the preservation of America's republican form of government," grounded in a study of the "nation's founding principles" and

Politics of Television in Egypt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Walter Armbrust "A History of New Media in the Middle East," *Journal for Cultural Research* 16.2-3 (2012): 155–74; Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2010); Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2017); Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Palestine, Israel and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

² Tanya Price, "White Public Spaces In Black Places: The Social Reconstruction Of Whiteness In Washington, D.C." *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 27.3/4 (Fall-Winter, 1998): 301–344; Brett Williams, *Upscaling Downtown: Stalled Gentrification in Washington, D.C.* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

³ Abu El Haj, *Facts*, 8–19.

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 24.

⁵ Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), "Social Studies Standards," 3, <https://osse.dc.gov/publication/social-studies-standards>.

“cultural heritage,” which are “boundless sources of vitality and pride.”⁶ In the standards document, culturally contingent understandings of individual and economic freedom, justice, truth, and civility hold more value than facts that might problematize positivist American republican ideology. As relates to the Middle East, the standards discussed in this paper either overtly advance Orientalist myths and clichés that intend to service the “preservation of America’s republican form of government” or they obscure more than they reveal about “[t]he central ideas, events, people, and works that have shaped our world, for good or ill.”⁷

All education systems must establish standards of proficiency, and there is nothing inherently objectionable about infusing values through an education system.⁸ DC’s learning standards, however, emphasize what the Movement for Black Lives referred to in 2016 as the “ideals the [U.S.] articulates” rather than those it “has never achieved.”⁹ The contradiction between professed and lived ideals is particularly acute in Washington, D.C., an internal colony of the United States. Washingtonians are U.S. citizens but they do not have the full franchise of that citizenship. They do not send a voting representative to federal legislatures, their local budgets must be approved by Congress, and Congress can, for any reason, veto their local laws. This is the status of taxation without representation, and it is wrapped in questions of race and racial equity: though gentrification has recently altered this, DC’s majority population has historically been Black. Thus, I engage the question of colonial domination at multiple levels: how does official knowledge production represent Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners as inferiors; and how is this representation employed in the context of the colonial occupation of Black Washingtonians? I find, under current curricula in DC, that premises presupposing and reinforcing ideas of, on the one hand, the supremacy of American republicanism and, on the other hand, the inferiority of the Middle East, encapsulate the contradictions of American colonialism inasmuch as they mask the dynamics of conquest and rule that make American republicanism possible.¹⁰ In other words, American Orientalism props up antiblack racism.¹¹ Representing America with positivist exceptionalism and representing the Middle East as irrational and violent obscures or erases the systemic and systematic violence enacted on Black people throughout the history of the United States. Employed in Washington, D.C., Public Schools, whose students are nearly 70 percent

⁶ OSSE, “Social Studies Standards,” 3.

⁷ OSSE, “Social Studies Standards,” 3.

⁸ See, for example, Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁹ #VisionForBlackLives 2016 Policy Demands (Accessed through the Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170611115106/https://policy.m4bl.org/downloads/>).

¹⁰ Dirks in Abu El Haj, *Facts*, 5.

¹¹ Michael Dumas, “Against the Dark: Antiblackness in Education Policy and Discourse,” *Theory into Practice*, 55.1 (2016) 11–19; Frank B. Wilderson, *Red White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Black, American Orientalism advances a narrow, Eurocentric U.S. nationalism among Black Washingtonians living under U.S. occupation.¹²

I want to underscore that students are not the subjects of my research. This is an inquiry into the violent conditions in which students learn and in which their teachers work. The first section of this paper details the colonial condition of Washington, D.C. I dwell on DC's colonial status for two reasons. First, I aim to destabilize the boundary between colony and metropole and undermine the here-versus-there thinking that is part of American Orientalism: colonial violence occurs at home, too. In the process, I reveal the complicated context in which the Middle East learning standards are implemented. The second section builds on this structural analysis by interrogating the "configurations of power"¹³ that shape the learning standards. I discuss the language used in the Middle East standards as well as the standards document's institutional location within local DC government, within the national security state, and within the structures of neoliberal economics and governance. This section applies theories and analytical frames from Modern Middle East Studies to analyze institutions of the United States and the knowledge about the Middle East these institutions produce. Drawing on my own experience teaching Middle East Studies in DC Public Schools, the third section of this paper raises questions about the relationship between the learning standards and teachers' work conditions – after all, teachers' work conditions are students' learning conditions. Specifically, I consider whether such conditions support or inhibit the development of a "praxis"¹⁴ which could deconstruct U.S. colonialism inside American public schools – in other words, whether Middle East Studies specialists can do their work inside this system. The final section discusses ongoing efforts to change DC's learning standards by anchoring them to critical race theory. I conclude by offering both theoretical and practical implications of potential changes on pedagogy, subject formation and U.S. empire in DC's public school system.

Capital Colony

When thinking about Washington, D.C., Public Schools (DCPS), and whether Middle East Studies specialists can enact a critical pedagogy within the school system, it is essential to consider the colonial relationship between the U.S. Federal Government and the inhabitants of the city. A text that guides my understanding of this relationship is Tanya Price's 1998 article titled "White Public Spaces in Black Places: The Social Reconstruction of Whiteness in Washington, D.C." The main takeaway of this article for me is that Washington, D.C., represents one of the most "obscene contradictions of American history," as a "site of racial domination. . . which stands in stark contrast to the city's primary role as a symbol of democracy in the United States

¹² One might ask if the standards related to other regions also represent it as inferior to the United States. My regional expertise on the Middle East precludes me from arriving at an assessment on that question, though other researchers may arrive at a similar, or different, conclusion.

¹³ Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

¹⁴ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 51.

and the world.”¹⁵ Racial domination in DC plays out in structural ways, like congressional control over the city’s budget and legislation, but also in more subtle ways, like the commonly heard refrain among the white professional class that “no one actually lives here.” Social practices like these create within DC white public spaces, “sites of ideological struggle where racism is reproduced by the professional class.”¹⁶ The “reproduction of whiteness” – “a set of locators that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to domination” – means the “suppression of blackness.”¹⁷ Price’s article “nam[es] the construction of whiteness [and] displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance.”¹⁸ I aim in this paper to build on that practice: by unearthing epistemological commitments of DC curricula, I deconstruct their role in elaborating white supremacy.¹⁹

I read Price’s article at some point during my graduate studies at Oxford, when I was conducting fieldwork in another colonial capital, Jerusalem.²⁰ During my preparation for teaching a twelfth-grade social studies requirement for DCPS, *The History and Government of Washington, D.C.*,²¹ I returned to Price’s article while grappling with my status as an Oxford- and Georgetown-educated cis, heterosexual, Ashkenazi, Anglo-American male teaching the history of the city to Black students. Though I am arguing in this paper that the learning standards contribute to the reproduction of whiteness in Black places in DC, it remains that *DC History* has the potential to counterbalance that form of domination. Indeed, my preparation for *DC History* deepened my knowledge of the colonial condition of DC. For example, I learned that the area we now know of as DC was initially inhabited by the Nacostin people, one of hundreds of indigenous peoples who inhabited the Chesapeake Bay region, stretching from what is today DC to North Carolina. Like other encounters in colonial America, the Nacostins were decimated by disease and genocide enacted upon them by European settlers. Thus, the origin story of DC is, like the origin story of the United States, borne out of settler colonialism and the racist ideologies underpinning it.²²

¹⁵ Price, “White public spaces,” 303.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ I follow Michael Dumas’ (2016) rationale for capitalizing Black and not white. Dumas explains: “Black is understood as a self-determined name of a racialized social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinship. . . . White is not capitalized in my work because it is nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror. Thus, white is employed almost solely as a negation of others – it is, as David Roediger (1994) insisted, nothing but false and oppressive. Thus, although European or French are rightly capitalized, I see no reason to capitalize white.”

²⁰ Thomas Abowd, *Colonial Jerusalem: The Spatial Construction of Identity and Difference in a City of Myth, 1948–2012* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

²¹ Henceforth *DC History*.

²² One vestige of the Nacostins in D.C. today is the name of the neighborhood “Anacostia,” an underserved predominately working class and poor Black neighborhood. The mascot of Anacostia High School is “The Indians.”

As a political entity, George Washington established DC to serve as a federal capital separate from the union of states that made up the early republic. It is generally understood that he did so after Revolutionary War veterans mutinied in Philadelphia over unpaid wages.²³ The first president decided that there needed to be a federal capital, a seat for the government, where it could establish federal government as the absolute authority. The location in the Chesapeake region was chosen as a link between the plantation economies of the south, and the trading economies of the north – that is, to link the region of the settler colony that harvested raw goods with the region that bankrolled the plantation economy and exported its goods to the global market. Slavery was legal in DC until 1850, but there was always a population of free Black people, making it a popular destination for rebellious or runaway slaves, but one fraught with danger as they could be captured and sold again into chattel slavery – as opposed to the mostly domestic work that slaves carried out within the boundaries of the federal capital.²⁴

From 1850 to 1968, Washington developed an educated, skilled, and politically active Black professional class and proletariat earning DC the nickname “Chocolate City” and inspiring the Leadbelly song “Bourgeois Blues.” Nevertheless, DC’s population remained in an acute colonial relationship with the city’s white residents and the federal institutions that governed the city. The history of that relationship can be summarized as follows: from 1871 to 1874, there existed in DC a territorial government and residents elected a non-voting member to congress. Ostensibly, a budget crisis in the city prompted Congress to abolish the territorial government and remove Washington’s member of Congress, establishing instead a three-member, presidentially appointed commission to govern DC. This commission was answerable to Congress. The commission system wholly disenfranchised Washingtonians and drew an end to an era where local Black voters could implement social services and public works – replacing it was a system of patronage where local business elites lobbied for their own interests.²⁵ It was not until 1960, when the 23rd Amendment passed that Washingtonians regained some form of voting rights – even then, only the right to vote for president. Thirteen years later, Congress put in place what is known as Home Rule, in which Washingtonians elect a mayor and city council, but their power is limited: Congress must approve the city’s budget and can veto any legislation passed by the city council. Given this structural relationship, I consider the phrase Home Rule to be a euphemism masking colonial rule. Elected government in DC resembles other forms of colonial rule, where local notables or elites serve as the intermediaries between the colonized

²³ Price, “White public spaces,” 318; Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

²⁴ Price, “White public spaces,” 320.

²⁵ CQ Researcher, “Should Washington citizens have a vote in Congress?” by Colin Soloway, <https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqrsrre2008041100>.

and colonizers – in this case Black Washingtonians and the settler-controlled federal government – and as such contributes to relations of domination.²⁶

Like other cities in late capitalism, DC is also subject to colonial dynamics in the form of gentrification, the movement of more highly educated, typically more white people and capital into historically neglected urban spaces disrupting social and family networks and displacing Black Washingtonians.²⁷ That “middle-class whites,” as Williams refers to gentrifiers, today prefer “the excitement of city life” and the convenience of not having to commute is not the result of linear historical processes. The neighborhood I taught in had been a predominately Jewish neighborhood prior to 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Bolling v. Sharpe* to end segregation in DC Public Schools. This ruling prompted white flight from my neighborhood and throughout DC as a whole, resulting in the expansion of Black tenancy and property ownership throughout formerly segregated neighborhoods in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸ The 1968 riots destroyed many pockets of Black wealth in DC and put the city on a downward economic trajectory that resulted in the property speculation and reemergence of white professionals in the 1990s and 2000s. When I first moved to DC in 2007 to attend Georgetown University as an undergraduate, it was generally considered “sketchy” to go to bars or restaurants east of 18th street in Adams Morgan. By the time I graduated, U Street and H Street – both historical hubs for the city’s Black residents – emerged as hip and desirable areas for white people to spend time and money. Since 2015 “Chocolate City” no longer holds a Black majority, with the Black population as a percentage of the total population dropping

²⁶ Marion Barry stands out as a local leader who confronted and challenged racialized colonial rule in Washington – yet Barry is often held out by white Washingtonians as an emblematic example of the “problems” related to Home Rule, i.e., that left to self-govern, Washington would be racked by corruption or public misconduct. See Harry S. Jaffe and Tom Sherwood, *Dream City: Race Power and the Decline (revival?) of Washington, D.C.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014) as well as the film *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry* (2009) for depictions of Barry’s political life and the relationships he maintained with white systems of power in and outside of DC.

²⁷ Brett Williams, *Upscaling Downtown: Stalled Gentrification in Washington, D.C.* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

²⁸ For readers who find my partial conflation of white and Jewish intriguing, unsettling or worthy of further unpacking, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998). My point – minor in the scope of this paper – is not to gloss over variegated experiences with race and whiteness among Jews in Washington, D.C., where Jews were often written into housing covenants barring them from living in certain neighborhoods. DC has also historically been home to a population of Jewish people of color, namely from Syria and Lebanon – not to mention Black Jews. Rather, I am reflecting the general, if not somewhat fluid, social construction of white-passing Jews as having access to whiteness, white spaces, and white privilege within, specifically, Black places in DC. An altogether different subject beyond the scope of this paper: the Black Hebrew Israelites maintain a steady public presence in Washington, D.C., and some of them would not even recognize the Jewish communities Brodtkin writes about and I refer to as even being Jewish.

from 59% in 2004 to 48% in 2015.²⁹ And while DC is 44% white, white students comprise under 10% of the city's public and charter school student population.³⁰ Outside of the city's public application schools, there is only one public high school with a significant population of white students, Woodrow Wilson High School.³¹ Located in upper Northwest, itself a white enclave, Wilson has the longest waiting list of all of DC's high schools. But while upper Northwest is 83.5% white, Wilson is 37.5% white.³² The school system's continued racial segregation nearly 70 years after *Bolling v. Sharpe* leaves the system as a site of colonial domination.

But DC is both colony and metropole – a fact which is brought to relief when considering the U.S. government's fraught relationship with the Middle East. Home to the federal government and its national security apparatus, DC is the city from which U.S. empire emanates.³³ Wonks, diplomats, and strategists operate out of federal agencies, and when their service is paused or over, they frequently take up employment at one of the city's many think tanks or teach at one of the city's institutes of higher learning where there are programs to train the next generation of aspiring foreign policy minds and mavens. These ancillary institutions help to legitimate American empire and reproduce the presuppositions – the epistemological commitments – that make American hegemony possible.³⁴ Indeed what often draws youngsters to attend places like American University's School of International Service, Georgetown's School of Foreign Service, Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, and George Washington's Elliott School of International Affairs are the opportunities to study under policy practitioners and access the halls of power while studying for a degree. Such students have the opportunity to pass through a pipeline from university to government to think tank and back to the university to then play the role of mentor and teacher for the next generation. If such individuals maintain residence in DC – and many don't – they technically hold the same citizenship status as Black Washingtonians, though it is important to

²⁹ DC Office of Planning, "District of Columbia State Data Center Quarterly Report: Blacks in the Nation's Capital," https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/DCOP_SDC_Winter%252006%2520Quarterly%2520Report.pdf; DC Office of Planning, "Tables for the District of Columbia 2015 Population Estimates," <https://planning.dc.gov/node/1176686>.

³⁰ Maurice Jackson, "An Analysis: African American Employment, Population & Housing Trends in Washington, D.C.," <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/769vofp6ow18vqi7hbvh83778g8z9xd>

³¹ Woodrow Wilson High School Profile, <http://profiles.dcps.dc.gov/Woodrow+Wilson+High+School>

³² DC Office of Planning, "Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin, for All Ages and for 18 Years and Over, and Housing Units, for the District of Columbia - Ward 3: 2000 and 2010," <https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Census%25202010%2520Population%2520by%2520Race%2520and%2520Ethnicity%2520-%2520Ward%25203.pdf>.

³³ It is worth pointing out that the demographic shifts caused by gentrification occurred after 9/11 and the expansion of the United States' national security state. I have not read any studies directly linking these two trends, though one can feasibly perceive a correlation – if not a causation – by reading the 2010 four-part Washington Post investigation *Top Secret America*, which explores the economics of the post-9/11 boom: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/top-secret-america/2010/07/19/hidden-world-growing-beyond-control-2/>.

³⁴ See Lockman (2009) and Lockman (2016).

draw a distinction. For those whose profession is to advise or guide U.S. empire, lacking congressional representation is not technically an impediment to their individual exercise of political power. After all, their lives are structured around the process of personally and directly advancing U.S. hegemony. These individuals represent not colonized Washingtonians but what Price refers to as the Anglo-American settlers in DC – notwithstanding their widespread appropriation of the phrase “taxation without representation.”

In my experience as an educator, Black Washingtonians were both inside and outside of this system and, in many cases, maintained their own relationships to the Middle East that are not necessarily predicated on the subjugation of the Middle East.³⁵ Two forms of identification were prevalent in the community in which I taught: Black American Muslims and military families who serve in the region – and there can be overlap in these groups.³⁶ I will avoid generalizing views of students who are not subjects of my research.³⁷ I will,

³⁵ Price, who conducted research while working for the Congressional Black Caucus, provides rich detail on Black Washingtonians’ position as workers vis-à-vis institutions of American empire.

³⁶ One might also speak of a third group consisting of migrants – such as Arabic speakers from the Sudan and Amharic and Tigrinya speakers from Ethiopia and Eritrea – who arrived in the United States via a Middle Eastern route. Such individuals may not identify as Black Washingtonians – or as Middle Easterners – and can live in immigrant enclaves where ties to the region persist strongly. Still, within America’s colonial racialization, such individuals might be seen from the outside as both Middle Easterners and as indistinguishable from the historical community of Black Washingtonians.

³⁷ My students were not blank slates. Black communities in America have maintained ties to the region dating back to slavery through the present day. See Ronald A.T. Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Cannon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), which critiques the role of literacy and reason in the legibility of Black Americans through an exegesis of African-Arabic slave narratives. See also Melani McAlister’s chapter “The Middle East in African American Cultural Politics, 1955–1972,” in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media & U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 84–124. McAlister explores how religion, anticolonialism, and nationalism contributed to fostering complex relationships with the Middle East among Black Americans. See also the #VisionforBlackLives 2016 Policy Demands for a contemporary articulation of a relationship some Black Americans maintain with the region and a critique of U.S. empire there. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) faced criticism from some Jewish groups for referring to genocide in Palestine, which M4BL argued the United States is complicit in. See, e.g., the Washington Post, “Jewish groups decry Black Lives Matter platform’s view on Israel,” by Julie Zauzmer, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/08/05/jewish-groups-decry-black-lives-matter-platforms-view-on-israel/>; the Atlantic, “Why Do Black Activists Care About Palestine,” by Emma Green, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/why-did-black-american-activists-start-caring-about-palestine/496088/>; Tablet Magazine, “From Left to Right, Jewish Groups Condemn ‘Repellent’ Black Lives Matter Claim of Israeli ‘Genocide,’” by Yair Rosenberg, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/from-left-to-right-jewish-groups-condemn-repellent-black-lives-matter-claim-of-israeli-genocide>. See also +972 Magazine, “PHOTOS: Tear gas not the only thing connecting Ferguson and Palestine,” by Activestills, <https://www.972mag.com/photos-tear-gas-used-in-ferguson-and-west-bank/>; and Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). As M4BL came under attack, The Center for Constitutional Rights offered a defense of the use of the term genocide to describe Israeli policies toward Palestinians, grounding their analysis in the historical definition of genocide coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin and international law as well as human

however, point out that the military loomed large in my community. Uniformed officers taught in my school, which ran a JROTC program. And while military families were rightfully proud of their service and received the financial benefits of military pensions and scholarship funds, trauma was evident, which presented a pedagogical challenge for me in seeking to undo stereotypes about Middle Eastern violence. Further, the “Double Victory” promise³⁸ remains unfulfilled for Black Washingtonians: despite serving in the U.S. military for more than a century Black Washingtonians’ citizenship status remains a class below other Americans.

Ordered to Commit

My central argument is that the social studies learning standards represent another form of colonial domination of Anglo-Americans over Black Washingtonians. I mean this in two ways, principally. On one hand, the standards uphold a “culture of fact”³⁹ predicated on the epistemological commitment to American republicanism, a system that deprives Black Washingtonians of full citizenship. Second that this domination and deprivation institutionally occur embedded within the neoliberal national security state. While critical revisions to the standards are underway, that we are more than four decades after the publication of *Orientalism* shows how slow public education is to adopt innovations in theory, pedagogy, and historiography. And this, in my view, is to the detriment of the subjugated communities who, up to this point, have received education structured around Eurocentric presuppositions.

At face value, the purpose of the standards document is to demarcate what knowledge is valid. They “provide teachers and curriculum coordinators with a summary of what history and social science content should be taught from grade to grade, prekindergarten through high school” and “outline what learners of social science and history should know and demonstrate by the end of each grade or course.”⁴⁰ The document is about setting expectations of what knowledge students should acquire at a particular grade level.⁴¹ It is therefore, at the most basic level, a mechanism for ordering knowledge aimed to disciplinarily ground, and discipline, political subjects,⁴² a fact which can be gleaned from the document’s “Guiding Philosophy”:

“As Americans, our cultural heritage is diverse and provides us with boundless sources of vitality and pride. As citizens and residents of the

rights scholarship: <https://ccrjustice.org/genocide-palestinian-people-international-law-and-human-rights-perspective>. In 2020, M4BL removed references to Israel in their political platform. <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.

³⁸ National Museum of African American History and Culture, “Double Victory: The African American Military Experience,” <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/double-victory>.

³⁹ Abu El Haj, *Facts*, 15.

⁴⁰ OSSE, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

United States, our political heritage is a shared vision of a life of liberty, justice, and equality as expressed over two centuries ago in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and The Federalist Papers.

Critical to the preservation of America's republican form of government is the study and understanding of our nation's founding principles. Devotion to human dignity and freedom, equal rights, justice, the rule of law, civility and truth, tolerance of diversity, mutual assistance, personal civic responsibility, self-restraint and self-respect must be taught, learned and practiced. They are qualities that should not be taken for granted or regarded as merely one set of options against which any other may be accepted as equally worthy."⁴³

This Guiding Philosophy straightforwardly indicates the document's epistemological commitments. It reveals a "culture of fact" which aims to "define what. . .count[s] as knowledge."⁴⁴ The historical and moral positivism bestowed on America's founding documents and "political heritage" intend to shape the terms by which teachers lead an historical inquiry with their students. While the standards' authors make an effort to acknowledge a process of scientific and moral discovery by stating values need to be "taught, learned and practiced," the process has an end-goal predetermined for the both the students and teachers: pride in and preservation of the American system of government, irrespective of its success in achieving its professed values. I read this philosophy, therefore, as seeking to "extend. . . the very parameters of what [is] imaginable and plausible, rendering *given* that which in fact [has] to be made," in this case, American republicanism.⁴⁵ My concern is not that any of the values articulated in the document are necessarily objectionable. It is that these values are denied to Black Washingtonians. This emphasis on American republicanism is a form of domination when it is employed in classrooms of students who do not enjoy the fruits of that republicanism. It is, in other words, a form of domination to require educators to promote and preserve a system that both disenfranchises and subjugates their own students.

DC Public Schools introduced the learning standards in 2005, two years before the DC City Council passed the Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA) in 2007. That act dissolved the city's school board and put DCPS under control of the mayor.⁴⁶ While today the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) has the power to write, revise, and

⁴³ OSSE, 3.

⁴⁴ Abu El Haj, *Facts*, 15–16.

⁴⁵ Abu El Haj, *Facts*, 10.

⁴⁶ This legislation and the reforms it initiated are controversial – specifically, to name just a few reasons, in terms of the proliferation of standardized testing, the nature of teachers' evaluations, the establishment of school choice, and the growth of charter schools. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this legislation at length. In the meantime, readers can learn more about the reforms by reading Rachel M. Cohen's 2017 article "How D.C. Became the Darling of Education Reform," <https://prospect.org/education/d.c.-became-darling-education-reform/> and the National Research Council's 2011 study *A Plan for Evaluating the District of Columbia's Public*

propose standards, and the State Board of Education (SBOE) has the right to approve standards, in 2005 this work fell squarely on DCPS' Social Studies team, which was, at that time, staffed by no more than two individuals. Those people were responsible for more than just standards: they also oversaw professional development of all social studies teachers in DCPS, curricular planning for K-12, and testing. Consequently, DCPS contracted out the process of developing standards to StandardsWork, a company founded in the early 1990s by a former aide to Lamar Alexander, the Republican senator who served as George H.W. Bush's education secretary.⁴⁷ In addition to producing the content standards for Washington, D.C., this company has written the standards for California (1998), Arizona (1999), Maryland (1999), Pennsylvania (1999), Oklahoma (1999), and Texas (2008). That DCPS was so understaffed speaks to the starving of resources that prevails in local DC government. As stated above, the federal government – the occupying power in DC – is responsible for approving DC's local budget. This starving of resources, indicates on the one hand relations of domination and, on the other hand, results in the privatization of a public good, the hallmark of neoliberal governance.

The Department of Defense tapped the founder of StandardsWork to advise the Iraqi Ministry of Education during the American occupation of Iraq in the early 2000s. Inasmuch as the company intersects with the national security state it participates in relations of colonial domination. Indeed, the sharing of methods and expertise between the military and public education systems is a historical feature of colonial modernity.⁴⁸ I submit that the intersection of these different instruments of power – cultural supremacism, ordering knowledge, foreign occupation, and neoliberal governance – while not necessarily intentional are beyond happenstance. Their coterminous existence, in other words, is intrinsic to the system of colonial domination that American society is predicated on. Further, while the standards are subject to forthcoming changes, it is possible, given the colonial status of DC, that lobbying groups and/or federal legislators can override the will of local educators and government, and thereby reify the colonial status of Washington, D.C. I will return to this in greater depth in the final section of this article.

I now want to turn to some of the standards related to the Middle East to illustrate how the epistemological commitment to republicanism manifests in the delineation of valid knowledge for high school history students. My focus in this paper are five standards for the tenth-grade World History survey course related to broadly significant topics for the field of Modern Middle East Studies: World War I; Pan-Arabism and struggles for self-determination; Israel/Palestine; terrorism; as well as the Gulf States. I also chose these standards because they are emblematic of the American Orientalism that I argue structures this document. Through this Orientalism, the standards fail to set out expectations of proficiency that I believe civically engaged students should

Schools: From Impressions to Evidence (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press) <https://doi.org/10.17226/13114>.

⁴⁷ StandardsWork, "About Us," <https://standardswork.org/about-us/>.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

meet before entering post-secondary college or careers. As such, these standards both fail by their own metrics, and may create a barrier for post-secondary educators to advance critical knowledge about the Middle East among students.

A note on how the standards are formatted: the first number signifies the grade level, the second number signifies the unit's number in sequence out of a total of fourteen to sixteen units, and the last number is the standard's coding within that unit's scheme, with most units having between 5 and 15 coded points of knowledge. There are 12 other standards related to the Middle East after 1798 that are included in the appendix to this article, and the entire standards document is linked in my footnotes. My use of these five standards is simply an editorial choice.

10.5.8 Analyze how the World War I settlement contributed to the rise of both pan-Arabism and nationalist struggles for independence in the Middle East.

There is no question that the WWI settlement had an impact on liberation struggles in Arabic-speaking locales. The issue is that this is the only standard in the entire document pertaining to “struggles for independence in the [Arab] Middle East,” and we might conclude that it was a peace agreement written without significant Arab involvement that prompted such struggles. There is some consensus, at least among scholars who write macro-histories of the Middle East, that Arabism as a cultural concept and identity marker emerged at least in the 1860s, during what is known as the *nahda*.⁴⁹ At that time, an Arab reading public coalesced as printing presses in Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt circulated news, commentary, and philosophy throughout the region – giving shape to an “imagined community” of Arabs.⁵⁰ Of course, some Arabs were pleased by Woodrow Wilson’s 14 Points.⁵¹ But if the goal is for students to understand “[t]he central ideas, events, people, and works that have shaped our world, for good or ill,”⁵² this standard is lacking, specifically the perspective of Arabs as masters of their own destiny who, prior to the Paris Peace Conference – which at best left their national aspirations in a holding pattern and at worst abrogated their rights altogether – developed their own ideas of what a “pan-Arab” community meant and what national liberation might entail. This standard, therefore, begs for reading history through an American-centric lens, in which Wilson and his “settlement” are the harbingers of Arab liberation. Never mind that Wilson’s agenda was coopted abroad by British and French imperial interests and by isolationist legislative

⁴⁹ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010) 302–4; Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 138; and Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 42–48.

⁵⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991); Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy 1900–1948* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004); Ami Ayalon, “Private Publishing in the *Nahda*.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40.4 (2008): 561–77.

⁵¹ Rogan, *The Arabs*, 158.

⁵² OSSE, 3.

obstruction at home. Moreover, Wilson's legacy is completely whitewashed in the standards document, which makes no mention of the segregation he implemented within the Federal Government in DC, ending upward mobility for a generation of Black Washingtonians.⁵³

10.9.5. Explain the significance and effects of the location and establishment of Israel on world affairs. (G, P)

I think Middle East Studies scholars all agree that the establishment of the State of Israel is a significant event with an impact on world affairs – moreover that the location of the State of Israel contributes to the significance and impact. Similar to pan-Arabism in 10.5.8., this is the first mention of Israel – Zionism does not appear in the document. And while with pan-Arabism the agent is the nebulous “WWI Settlement” here we might conclude that the state of Israel emerges out of the ether. Is neither the Balfour Declaration nor the Dreyfus Affair relevant to the study of Israel in world history? Indeed, the term antisemitism is also absent from the document altogether. Similarly, while the Holocaust and Armenian Genocide are included in the document, no mention is made of the three-quarters of a million Palestinians who were killed or expelled from Palestine in 1947–1948 – a period known as the *Nakba*.⁵⁴ Perhaps the authors felt justified in giving the establishment of Israel a standard on its own; but surely mentioning the expulsion of Palestinians would be appropriate in 10.15.2:

10.15.2. Explain the United Nations' vote in 1947 to partition the western part of the Palestine Mandate into two independent countries, the rejection by surrounding Arab countries of the U.N. decision to establish Israel, the rise of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the invasion of Israel by Arab countries. (P, M)

Failing to mention Palestinian refugees, let alone the *Nakba*, conveys that the lived experience of Palestinians is not essential knowledge for high school students. In the end, this omission flies in the face of the document's Guiding Philosophy which is ostensibly “[d]evot[ed] to human dignity. . . equal rights. . . and truth.” Or, rather, it reflects the epistemological commitment to American republicanism, which, too, denies that Palestinians experienced an ethnic cleansing at the hands of Zionist militias in 1947–48.

10.15.1. Identify the weakness and fragility of the oil-rich Persian Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and others. (P)

This standard at once denigrates America's regional clients and hides the patterns of American capitalist consumption that fuel the oil-driven economies of the Gulf States. Given the standards company's connection to American policy in the Middle East, I wonder why the document does not have students consider the

⁵³ Abhay Aneja and Guo Xu, “The Costs of Employment Segregation: Evidence from the Federal Government under Wilson,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 27798 (September 2020), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27798>.

⁵⁴ See Abowd (2014); Rashid Khalidi *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Salim Tamari, *Jerusalem 1948: The Arab Neighborhoods and their Fate in the War* (Ramallah, Palestine: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2002); Helga Tawil-Souri, “My Aunt's Mamilla,” in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, Issue 58 (2014), <https://oldwebsite.pal-estine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/My%20Aunt%27s%20Mamilla%20%20JQ-58-5.pdf>.

role the United States plays in the Gulf States by basing military there, and by selling Gulf States significant quantities of military hardware. It is important to point out the contrast here between the “weak” Gulf states and American culture as a “source of vitality.”⁵⁵ Taken together, I propose that this document therefore engages in manifest Orientalism – “they” are weak and “we” are strong. This opposition is the crux of Orientalism, which divides between East and West to establish a hierarchy with the Oriental Other always the inferior.

10.15.8. Explain the increase in terrorist attacks against Israel, Europe, and the United States. (P)

Though this standard does not explicitly mention the Middle East, this is subordinate to Standard 10.15, which requires students to “analyze the major developments in the Middle East since World War II.”⁵⁶ This standard is a striking example of the way in which objective language and the pretense to authority masks an otherwise racist worldview. On one level this standard is objectively true: since World War II there has been an increase in attacks that Israeli, European, and American governments and media represent as terrorism. I find this standard, however, to be an instance where “the very processes of surveying, excavating, naming, and arguing about. . . facts [instantiates] the (colonial-)national imagination’s most fundamental grammar in empirical – that is, demonstrable – form.”⁵⁷ This is to say that by naming these attacks as terrorism, it sets the terms of the debate and creates the fact that they are, requiring a participant in the classroom to go to great lengths to suggest otherwise. It would be a very sophisticated adolescent who sees this standard and makes the point that Israeli, European, and American governments are themselves responsible for enacting violence against civilian noncombatants that in turn result in reprisals which, under such circumstances, should not necessarily be considered terrorism – and it might be a risk for a public high school teacher to advance that hypothetical.⁵⁸ We can understand this standard – and perhaps the other standards, too – much in the same way as we think about certain claims made by the American far right – such as claims propagated by Donald Trump of Barack Obama’s or Kamala Harris’s birth in a foreign country and ineligibility for the position of president. By establishing the claim, it forces interlocutors to either allow it to stand unchallenged, or otherwise debate the notion, thereby placing the claim within the boundaries

⁵⁵ OSSE, 3.

⁵⁶ OSSE, 65.

⁵⁷ Abu El Haj, *Facts*, 15–16.

⁵⁸ Bill Bigelow, co-director of the Zinn Education project wrote a lesson/activity called “Whose ‘Terrorism’?” that allows students and educators to back into this point by anonymizing events such as Monsanto’s poisoning people in India, and asymmetric conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in a refugee camp. When I used this activity, students tended to identify the more powerful actor as the terrorist, and there is an answer key which reveals who the actors are. But this activity only illustrates the point I’m making, which is that owing to the discourses surrounding terrorism in the West, events have to be anonymized for American classrooms to critically engage these discourses. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/whose-terrorism/>.

of what Jurgen Habermas would call rational-critical debate.⁵⁹ This is, I propose, the essential mechanism of domination implemented by the standards: to set the terms of debate, which in the process of being responded to, or disproven, gain the status of rationality and validity.

Facts on the Ground

In dissecting these standards, I run the risk of overstating their importance to history education in DCPS. Indeed, among all of the history teachers I had conversations about standards with, there was near consensus about the problematic way they frame essential facts. Often these discussions reached a point of acknowledging that our job as public school educators intersected very frequently with what might otherwise be understood to be domestic care or childcare. Though our school was technically a “neighborhood school,” many students commuted from across the city, always from more impoverished and resource-starved areas – never, not once, from west of Rock Creek Park, or from the wealthier neighborhoods that abut the park to the east. Though we all would plan lessons – and I will discuss that in greater depth below – much of our days were spent allowing space for students to deal with trauma related to the structural inequities that they experienced as Black Washingtonians.⁶⁰ In short though, when “delivering content” we knew our classroom was ours and we concluded that we would teach history how we wanted.

The truth is students very infrequently even noticed the standards – perhaps in the way that many subjects of oppressive structures may not immediately be able to name it (and thus the role of the educator becomes clearer). On a day-to-day basis, the standards mostly serve as a form of worksite surveillance of teachers, who have to reproduce and represent the standards countless times in their administrative and preparatory work – work that any teacher will tell you cannot be completed during the teacher’s collectively bargained hours of work. As such, the standards, for me, raise questions about teachers’ relationship to language, capital, and the communities they work in: How do standards at once establish order and extract surplus value from the teacher? Moreover, how does official Orientalism and its related bureaucratic work and worksite surveillance promote or inhibit the enactment of a

⁵⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962). For critiques of Habermas see also, Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Joan B. Landes, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration,” in *Feminism, the Public and the Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ For example, in FY2017 89% of reported uses of force by Metro PD were on Black people, most commonly by white officers. See Police Complaints Board Office of Police Complaints, “Report on Use of Force by the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department Fiscal Year 2017,” <https://policecomplaints.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/office%20of%20police%20complaints/publication/attachments/UOF%2017%20Final.pdf>.

critical pedagogy in DCPS that could deconstruct U.S. empire in the Middle East?

A new history teacher may first encounter a content standard a month or so before the schoolyear begins when they receive their course assignments and gain access to official unit guides from the previous year. Unit Guides are teacher-facing documents that provide a conceptual overview of what will be taught in a given 2–3 week period. In Unit Guides produced for the 2017–18 schoolyear, all of the content standards which are covered in a unit appear on the first page in the top left of the page. Subsequently, standards are repeated in every section of the document. They are placed in the left column of a three-column section titled “Inquiry Arc.” They appear in the center column titled “Standards Assessed” in a section that explains the types of formative and summative assessments in the unit. Standards are listed atop the section outlining the pacing of the unit.

Teachers selected by the district create the Unit Guides at annual summer institutes where they work closely with the district’s social studies administrators. These administrators usually have classroom experience and often hold advanced degrees in the social sciences and humanities. Readings are updated in the Unit Guides every year at least partially because some courses don’t have anchor texts, and even if they do, some schools and most students may not have the resources to purchase them. Updated Unit Guides make their way to the teachers during a full-day professional development (PD) session the week before students enter the classroom, and they are available through an online portal for the teacher’s reference throughout their tenure as a DCPS employee.

Following the pace set by the Unit Guides, teachers must create daily lesson plans which reference the standard(s) they are teaching in each lesson. Similar to the Unit Guides, standards appear in the lesson plans at the top of the page. Lesson plans must adhere to a predetermined format – what is known as the 5E format. The five E’s are the different sections of the lesson that represent the arc of the lesson from a topic’s introduction to the assessment of whether the student met the day’s learning objective: Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, Evaluate. Learning objectives must also follow a common format – BTEOC SWBAT: “By the end of class students will be able to. . .”. Learning objectives must be aligned both to content standards and to common core literacy standards. There is some flexibility in the case of the latter, owing to a broad mismatch between students’ grade level and their assessed reading level. Consequently, teachers are expected to differentiate their lessons and “scaffold” activities up and down to accommodate more and less literate students, who in most cases are placed in classes together. What this means practically is that teachers often need to produce multiple different versions of the same reading, and create different entry points to as well as assessments of the standards for different groupings of students in a single classroom for a 70-minute period.

The general ratio of prep-to-teaching time at my school was 1:3 – for every three hours of teaching, we had one hour allotted for prep. This ratio shifted based on whether we would have department meetings or grade level meetings – both occurring every other week. Simply put, it was impossible for us to plan differentiated standards- and objectives-aligned lessons if we

“worked to rule” – that is, if we only worked the hours that our collective bargaining agreement (CBA) compensated us for: 7.5 consecutive hours beginning no earlier than 7:30 AM and ending no later than 4:30 PM. I would arrive to school at 6 AM and try to leave by 4:30 PM. Some people would arrive at 7:45 AM and stay until 9 PM. Some teachers would work from 6 AM to 9 PM, or even later. If the average teacher salary in DCPS is \$75,000, and their CBA includes 185 days of work, this means they get paid around \$405 a day. If teachers work between 12 and 15 hours a day only on those 185 days, i.e., they never work on the weekend, holiday or vacation, or the summer, teachers in DC earn, on average, between \$27 and \$34 an hour. What this means, in effect, is that credentialed public school teachers earn wages on par with servers at DC’s high-end restaurants.

Teachers are required to keep a binder with their lesson plans available for any unannounced visit by an administrator to the classroom. If an administrator spot-checks a teacher’s classroom and they do not have a lesson plan available, or if the plan does not include a standard, then the teacher is liable to be formally disciplined. The school district also mandates that teachers put a time-bound agenda on one of the white-boards in their room. Here also, standards are a necessary component. Failure to include a content standard in the time-bound agenda bears disciplinary consequences. I should be clear that I am not arguing against planning for lessons, or against differentiation of lessons for students with different literacy levels. I am rather trying to draw attention to the regime that structures teachers’ planning and how it gives meaning to the word “lesson.” In short, if, after a teacher completes hours of uncompensated bureaucratic work, there is no individually discernable literacy or content standard that students of widely divergent literacy levels can be assessed to have mastered in a 70-minute class period, then the teacher can be considered deficient in their professional duties. Further, this expectation applies even as students, in addition to differing in literacy levels, may be experiencing intersecting class, race, age, gender, and ability oppression. I argue that such requirements place pressure on the teacher to introduce and assess the most basic concepts, rather than setting up knowledge for critique.

It is only in a planned evaluative visit that administrators take the time to engage the teacher on whether or not a content standard was being taught and if it was being taught effectively according to a rubric set by the school district. That process is not perfect, but it is more predictable than the spot-checks, which are superficial examinations of lesson plans and white boards. Administrators conduct spot checks unevenly in any given school. That is to say that on a floor comprising a grade level, administrators will spot-check certain teachers more than others. Anecdotally, at my school, spot checks appeared to be more frequently directed at women, and women of color. Everyone experiences administrators parachuting into classrooms both on their own and also with multiple colleagues – with purposes generally undefined. Everyone also receives their fair share of what we called at my school nastygrams: administrative citations that outline what school or district policy is not being followed in a classroom. Nastygrams can be placed into the teacher’s personnel file and impact their year-long evaluation, which determines

whether they keep their job and receive performance-based promotions and raises. Everyone is meant to operate such that a drop-in may occur, but the people who experience regular drop-ins and nastygrams feel an even greater pressure to strictly adhere to the policies, necessitating many hours of uncompensated bureaucratic work, all incorporating the learning standards.

On the one hand, the bureaucratic work and concomitant surveillance serve to inhibit history teachers' creativity in planning and executing lessons. Burdened as they are by adhering to minute policies, there is less time to identify, curate, and scaffold materials that may offer critical perspectives. On the other hand, because teachers generally agree on the problematic nature of the standards, there arises the potential for what Piven and Cloward call rule breaking: "activating leverage inherent in contributions to social interdependencies."⁶¹ Because teachers are concerned about the relationship between their work and racial, economic, and social justice, and because teachers have to use some of their free time during the day to socialize and talk shop, they can share strategies for bringing critical ideas into their curricula. Lastly, because of the need to make space for students experiencing racialized trauma within DC, teachers may find the opportunity to draw connections between Washington's colonial context and the content of their history classes. Doing so would enable educators to develop what Paulo Freire refers to as "praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."⁶² Put differently, if educators are listening to students narrate their own stories, they can find ways to make history relevant and spark in students the desire to engage in what DCPS social studies administrators call informed civic action meant to transform the inequities that exist in their city, and indeed the world.

A New Standard?

In December 2020, the SBOE adopted Guiding Principles for an overhaul of the learning standards. Significant for my discussion is that the drafters of these principles critique the existing standards for "offer[ing] 'this or that' framing, which is rooted in racist thinking."⁶³ Moving forward, the SBOE advocates for "focus[ing] on the tenets of critical race theory. . . when describing power structures and systems." In sum, the SBOE asserts that the revised standards need to be "culturally inclusive and anti-racist, impart important social studies content in the early grades, strengthen student knowledge of democratic principles and values, and promote civic engagement." This will certainly involve overhauling and reframing content, but it extends to language, too: SBOE draws attention to the current standards' use of passive voice when describing acts of

⁶¹ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A Cloward, "Rulemaking, Rulebreaking, and Power," in *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*, ed Thomas Janoski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33–53.

⁶² Freire, *Pedagogy*, 51.

⁶³ The Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee, "Social Studies Standards Guiding Principles," https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/page_content/attachments/2020-12-16-FINAL-SSSAC-Guiding-Principles.pdf.

white supremacy. Moving forward, the Guiding Principles document advocates for using high-level verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy to reveal agency and intent in historical acts – necessary, the author's assert, for drafting standards that are "actively anti-racist, and that explicitly address discrimination against traditionally marginalized groups." The goal of these guiding principles is to give students "practice imagining and designing a more just society" – a shift, I believe, from the Eurocentric positivism – indeed, western chauvinism – at the core of the 2005 standards.

While teachers and social studies administrators have been having critical conversations about the standards for the past decade, the work to organize these changes began around 2015 when district-level social studies administrators began to cultivate relationships with members of the SBOE and discuss the standards. In other words, the critical thoughts about standards other teachers shared with me have been known to district-level administrators for at least a decade, and these administrators brought critiques to members of the SBOE. After Ruth Wattenburg, the Ward 3 SBOE representative, and Markus Batchelor, the Ward 8 SBOE representative, were chosen as the President and Vice President of the SBOE in January 2019, they formed a social studies working group. This alone is significant: within DCPS social studies is provincialized vis-à-vis English Language Arts (ELA) and Math – owing in part, I believe, to those two subjects' role in standardized testing. At the same time social studies administrators from DCPS convened a group of social studies educators across public and charter schools to discuss common issues. Those efforts led to a cross-sector survey of social studies teachers, the results of which prompted SBOE to hold a public hearing where they called for testimony on the standards. At the hearing, teachers and administrators criticized the standards' Eurocentrism and white-washing.⁶⁴ Subsequently, the SBOE put out a call for applications for the Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC), which began meeting in July 2020. The SSSAC drafted the new Guiding Principles. By February 2021, OSSE had selected the Social Studies Standards Technical Writing Committee (TWC), which consists of teachers from public and charter schools as well as a handful of academics from the DC area.⁶⁵ Still, the standards process will be contracted out, this time with Beth Ratway of the American Institutes of Research coordinating the efforts. The TWC aims to have new standards shared with the public by the end of the summer of 2021. The TWC and SSSAC will sift through the public feedback they receive to ensure alignment to the Guiding Principles. Pending the outcome of the public comment, the SBOE aims to adopt the new standards in the winter/spring of 2021–22 for use potentially as soon as 2022–23.

One must be cautiously optimistic about the effort to change the standards. In particular, the incorporation of critical race theory in public education has proven to be a political lightning rod. Nothing encapsulates this more clearly

⁶⁴ Graham Vyse, "D.C. educators target white racial bias in social studies standards as State Board launches rewrite," *The DC Line*, December 3, 2019,

<https://thedcline.org/2019/12/03/dcps-targets-white-racial-bias-in-social-studies-education-standards-as-state-board-launches-rewrite/>.

⁶⁵ <https://osse.dc.gov/page/social-studies-0>.

than the controversy over California's Ethnic Studies curriculum. In California, hardline pro-Israel groups such as StandWithUs and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) carried out a multifaceted pressure campaign to derail the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum on the grounds that it was anti-Semitic.⁶⁶ In addition to their specific attacks against incorporating Arab-American modules that address the *Nakba* and the global efforts to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel for its treatment of Palestinians,⁶⁷ they launched broadsides against critical race theory for allegedly creating a "hostile classroom environment." These efforts succeeded: the newest version of the curriculum removed references to the *Nakba* and the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.⁶⁸ At the same time, the newest version of the Ethnic Studies Curriculum incorporates lessons on antisemitism that both Jewish and non-Jewish critics assert advance a narrow definition of the subject in such a way as to solely promote the interests of the State of Israel.⁶⁹ For example, the curriculum focuses on racism experienced by Mizrahi Jews, but does not connect this discrimination more broadly to Islamophobia – that is to say it frames racism against Mizrahim as deriving from their status as Jews, not from their status as people from Muslim-majority countries.⁷⁰ This framing privileges a Jewish person's status as Jewish over other facets of their identity. Nor does the curriculum address internal discriminations against Mizrahi Jews within Ashkenazi-dominated institutions (including historically the State of Israel).⁷¹ Cutting Arab-American studies from the curriculum prompted the original 20 authors and members of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum advisory committee to remove their names from the model curriculum, feeling that their work was undermined by people with no experience in the field of Ethnic Studies itself.⁷²

⁶⁶ Gabi Kirk, "Authors of California Ethnic Studies Curriculum Decry Cuts to Arab Studies," *Jewish Currents*, February 3, 2021, <https://jewishcurrents.org/authors-of-california-ethnic-studies-curriculum-decry-cuts-to-arab-studies/>.

⁶⁷ Gabi Kirk, "Attacks from Pro-Israel Groups Threaten California's Ethnic Studies Curriculum," *Jewish Currents*, May 7, 2020, <https://jewishcurrents.org/attacks-from-pro-israel-groups-threaten-californias-ethnic-studies-curriculum/>.

⁶⁸ California Department of Education, "ESMC Third Field Review," <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/esmcthirdfieldreview.asp>; Gabe Stutman, "Ethnic studies curriculum passes 11-0 after one final day of sparring," *J Weekly*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.jweekly.com/2021/03/18/ethnic-studies-curriculum-passes-11-0-after-one-final-day-of-sparring/>.

⁶⁹ In addition to the *Jewish Currents* articles previously cited see, e.g., Ari Y. Kelman, Devin E. Naar, and Jessica Marglin, "Jewish Studies profs: Ethnic studies curriculum substitutes political concerns for historical accuracy," *J Weekly*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.jweekly.com/2021/03/16/jewish-studies-profs-ethnic-studies-curriculum-substitutes-political-concerns-for-historical-accuracy/>.

⁷⁰ Shahaar Zaken, a graduate student in sociology at UC Davis and a Mizrahi organizer told *Jewish Currents*, "Every Jewish Mizrahi that lives in America that looks Arab . . . has had an experience of Islamophobia."

⁷¹ See, e.g., Smadar Lavie, *Wrapped in the Flag of Israel: Mizrahi Single Mothers and Bureaucratic Torture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014) and Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*.

⁷² Save Arab American Studies, "Remove Names from Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum," <https://savearabamericanstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Letter-to-CDE-2.3.2021.pdf>.

One can imagine DC's standards overhaul coming under a similar attack. The main reason would stem from DC's colonial status. While the SBOE and OSSE can propose and advance changes to the standards, Congress can make DC's funding bill contingent on, say, removing any and all references to critical race theory from DC's updated learning standards. While the pressure campaign against Arab Studies in California necessitated some degree of grassroots organizing,⁷³ should there be opponents to DC's updated standards, they need only to limit their campaign to the elected officials on Capitol Hill – elected officials with no constituents in DC, but with voters at home who may laud their efforts to fight critical race theory, which the Trump administration called in September 2020 “divisive, anti-American propaganda.”⁷⁴ What will happen, for example, if DC's updated standards include references to the *Nakba* – or conversely, what will it reveal if they do not? The Guiding Principles document discussed above specifically cites antisemitism as a subject needing to be incorporated into the updated standards (and I would agree, as my discussion of Israel-related standards indicates). Still: will the discussion of antisemitism be grounded in an epistemological commitment which presupposes Zionism as the only logical or feasible response to antisemitism? Or will students be afforded a more nuanced understanding of Jewish responses to antisemitism – such as anti-Zionist revolutionary Marxism in Europe,⁷⁵ Mizrahi radicalism and solidarity with Third World liberation movements,⁷⁶ or ultra-Orthodox political indeterminacy or ambivalence,⁷⁷ which may manifest in outright resistance to Zionism,⁷⁸ or, alternatively, a certain type of right wing populism?⁷⁹ What direction the DC standards move in on these particularly thorny questions of Palestine and antisemitism – to say nothing of the manifest Orientalism and white-washing of Arab history I discuss above – depends on what groups and scholars have a say in the process. That remains to be seen. I submit, however, that, to advance the Guiding Principles' goal of critiquing power and exposing for students how power impacts bias, OSSE and SBOE should maintain a healthy skepticism of any powerful interest groups that seek to influence how DCPS approaches questions of hegemony, empire, and white supremacy in the Middle East. How the new standards address the

⁷³ And the links contained in the two above-cited Jewish Currents articles illustrate some of those efforts.

⁷⁴ Matthew S. Schwartz, “Trump Tells Agencies to End Trainings on ‘White Privilege’ and ‘Critical Race Theory,’” *National Public Radio*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/05/910053496/trump-tells-agencies-to-end-trainings-on-white-privilege-and-critical-race-theory>.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism* (London: Verso Books, 2016).

⁷⁶ See, e.g., the film *Forget Baghdad* (2002) and the recently published speech given by U.S. diplomat Robert Malley at Oxford in 2009, <https://jewishcurrents.org/an-anti-imperialist-father-and-his-american-diplomat-son/>.

⁷⁷ Moshe Krakowski, “Think All Orthodox Jews are Zionists? Think Again,” *The Forward*, October 11, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/411615/think-all-orthodox-jews-are-zionists-think-again/>.

⁷⁸ Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, “Israel's Ultra Orthodox,” in *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Issue 179 (1992) <https://merip.org/1992/11/israels-ultra-orthodox/>.

⁷⁹ Joshua Leifer, “The New Heimish Populism,” *Jewish Currents*, October 15, 2020, <https://jewish-currents.org/the-new-heimish-populism/>.

Middle East may, in other words, serve as a litmus test for the document's overarching commitment to critical race theory and anti-racism.

To conclude, epistemological commitments are unavoidable. Subject formation through scientific and historical inquiry must accept certain facts as self-evident. There must, in other words, be a point of reference for an historical inquiry – all inquiries hold premises, including this study. In DCPS social studies, that point of reference is informed civic action – in other words, there is a democratic positivism. Consequently, because social science education is preparing students for participation in civic life, it must discipline, or drill, students in certain forms of argumentation and certain forms of presentation – it must teach them to self-fashion in such a way as to be not just legible as a political subject, but to be effective within the confines of the political and social structure that is in place. In the case of Washington, D.C., students may come into the classroom already shaped by the contradictions contained within this political and social structure. These contradictions may manifest in acutely violent ways, such as seeing red, white, and blue police cars patrolling their neighborhoods and taking the lives of its residents – taking them either via an extrajudicial killing, or taking them away into the organs of the carceral state.

The question for educators is whether to promote a style of self-fashioning that accepts racialized state violence as legitimate expressions of the state, or whether to promote a style of self-fashioning that seeks to upend this system by, as Freire writes, exposing the system's contradictions. Indeed, too often exposing the contradiction is seen as rebelling *against* education, rather than encapsulating its principles. Should the educator cultivate among their students a self-fashioning that accepts the contradictions of American colonialism/republicanism, it works in the service of making public spaces white – scenes for the elaboration of domination. Should the educator cultivate a self-fashioning that, through exposure or excavation, aims to hold America accountable to the contradictions of its republicanism, it can serve as a bulwark against the violent impulses of the segregation in place in DC today. More than that, if teachers can elicit real stories and experiences from their students about their own lived experiences – stories which expose the contradictions inherent within American supremacy – then sufficient trust can be built up to undermine essentialist representations of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners. In short, problematizing the self-evidence of American supremacy can serve to problematize other ostensibly self-evident truths about the Middle East.

What could make this possibility more likely would be if Middle East Studies experts invested in the American public education system. This could include two approaches. For one, Middle East Studies scholars can pursue research agendas that focus on the American public education system. At the same time, given the precarity of higher education jobs, scholars in our field can and should seek employment in public school districts, where we can not only teach our discipline and its methodologies – often with students from MENA – but where we can organize as rank-and-file union members, a structure that has the ability to effect the political changes that we already advocate

for in forums like the Middle East Studies Association. In sum, does Orientalism determine pedagogy? That depends on the teacher and their work conditions.

Appendix: Additional Post 1798 Middle East Standards

10.4.6 Describe human rights violations and genocide, including the Armenian genocide in Turkey.
10.5.2 Describe the effects of the war and resulting peace treaties on population movement, the international economy, and shifts in the geographic and political borders of Europe and the Middle East.

10.10.2 Describe the Soviet-U.S. competition in the Middle East and Africa, including the conflicts in Afghanistan, the Congo, Angola, and Mozambique.

10.15.3 Trace the attempts to secure peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

10.15.4 Explain the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979 after Khomeini, the Iranian hostage crisis, and more recent nuclear issues.

10.15.5 Trace the defeat of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Mujahideen and the Taliban in Afghanistan

10.15.6 Trace the origins of the Persian Gulf War and the postwar actions of Saddam Hussein

10.15.7 Describe Islamic revivalism and radicalism, including Muslim communities in Europe.

10.15.9 Describe America's response to and the wider international consequences of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, including the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

11.14.3 Describe George H.W. Bush leading the U.N. coalition in the 1990–1991 Gulf War and his decision to liberate Kuwait but keep Saddam Hussein in power.

11.14.4 Debate the U.S. Middle East policy and its strategic, political, and economic interests, including those related to the Gulf War and the attempts to negotiate a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

11.14.9 Describe America's response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, including the intervention in Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq.

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