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## *Another Noble Dream: AP African American Studies and the Objectivity Question*

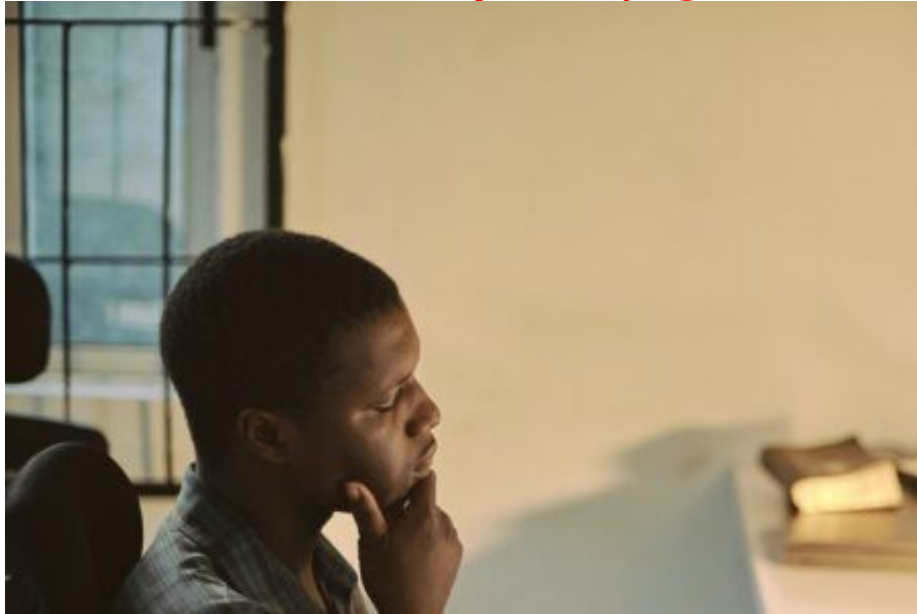


Image by Emmanuel Ikwuegbu.

AP African American Studies will be piloted as the latest program developed by the College Board and will soon be made available for secondary-level high school students in the United States. While the pre-pilot program (2017-2020) was featured in roughly ten schools, for this coming Fall, the course will be presented to a few dozen schools followed by nearly 200 schools by 2023. The course will be formally rolled out and introduced to a national and global set of schools by 2024. The Course Overview is compelling and incredibly interesting and includes, Origins of the African Diaspora, Freedom, Enslavement and Resistance, Practice of Freedom, and Movements, while covering an

enormous time span of the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The course and learning objectives were very carefully constructed by experts and leading researchers in the field of black history and included luminaries such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Skip Gates.

The reasons for AP African American Studies and its benefits seem obvious enough. First, by mainstreaming an achievement course in black history, schools show some semblance of seriousness in presenting a balanced playing field. Secondly, the course could attract more people of color into the field of teaching who most likely observed the dearth of black historical figures in their own education. Thirdly, the course has the potential to offset the vicious right-wing drive to pass “anti-woke” legislation. This group would like to permanently remove revisionist history and reinstall the nineteenth-century “great man theory.” Lastly, and oddly enough, the course could reveal unsavory truths about the American educational system and its considerable issues with race and class, perhaps ushering an end to APs once and for all.

Northwestern Professor of African American Studies Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor recently asked:

“Will high school students take AP instead of the college course because they have tested out with some blue book essays and a bubble sheet? Will these AP credits undermine collegiate African American Studies and departments?”

The data on APs across the board says yes on both matters but the two questions posed rhetorically are powerful enough.

On the one-hand, Advanced Placement courses have improved because of the resources available, so a course on African Americans enters at the right time. On the other hand, and in addition to the concerns raised by Taylor, is the fact that the course is not meant to rock the boat at all. Gates in Time Magazine stated that the subject is basically a mainstream course that provides a rich and deep history that has existed long before places like Howard University. This is a valid and completely understandable part of black historiography and historians have told us why we revere people of color that achieve and overcome. Historian John Ernest, the author of Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861, wrote about how the question of subjectivity came early for black writers and arrived much later for white writers who started with objectivity. David Walker, W.E.B. DuBois, and Harriet Jacobs – all obviously operated with a limited and at times nonexistent archive because of structural racism. They depended on composite studies that included a “moral imagination” to unread “white nationalist history,” argues Ernest.

Starting with subjectivity (which tends to be more progressive) and working towards objectivity (which tends to be more conservative) creates a double edge sword regarding the trajectory of institutionalizing black history. An interesting component of liberation historiography's legacy is the question of objectivity and the search or result of a more conservative proverbial "greatness." AP African American Studies brings the content closer to objectivity, institutionalization and standardization, but as Howard Zinn once remarked "is objectivity either possible or desirable?" There is no question that representation and inclusion is helpful in secondary schools and research has shown that children feel safer and more confident in academic settings when they can see themselves in the curriculum. The jury is still out, however, on how effective the AP course will be in accomplishing and furthering authentic liberation in terms of the sentiments outlined by Taylor.

What are the problems with the course and APs in general? First, Advanced Placement courses have often been places for achievement-oriented students that were aspirational and 'good at school' but not always as interested in the subject matter when compared to the desire to seek college credit. Second, is the question of readiness. Are APs really getting students ready for college courses? College professors tend to maintain skepticism on this. Third is the question of academic achievement in which the data points to mixed results. Of course, many of the AP teachers and students are outstanding in all subjects and would be in AP African American Studies as well. The problem is the number of students who enroll in AP that would benefit equally or even more in non-AP courses.

This raises the question; is an AP African American Studies course automatically better than a non-AP course that deals with black history? First and foremost, there is the question of what constitutes black history. When taught correctly, almost every subject in the humanities requires the teacher and student to encounter and synthesize the black past. If you had only fifteen minutes to explain standard American history to someone, the most practical way of distilling it might be to briefly summarize Dred Scott (1857), Homer Plessy (1896) and the Brown Family (1954). Any US history course that failed to cover these events and their extensive legacies would not be credible or legitimate.

Secondly, can we be so certain to conclude that students that survive the rigor of the AP course are more critical readers, writers, thinkers, and public speakers? What is to say for the richness of students who wish to study black history without timed tests and a formulaic pre-packaged curriculum?

Just as many students in the history of humankind are content with choosing the path of least resistance, there are students that desire to seek and find primary source material on their own and choose to read portions of texts in full. Does AP allow for this? Does AP allow for the advanced inquiry level and the prospects for it, that Taylor addresses and encompasses in her Tweet? Furthermore, should black history be associated more with enrichment and non-traditional methodologies in education and less with achievement, competitiveness, and conventional approaches? In some regards, the quest for historically marginalized subject matter to enter the establishment is following the path outlined in Aesop's fable, *The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs*.

I would never be so harsh as to discount any and every Advanced Placement class unconditionally, especially the potentially emancipatory African American course. At best the course would further shape the goals of a more rigorous AP, ignite interest in secondary school course selection, serve historically underserved communities, and attract more people of color to teaching that have been turned off, or outright denied, by a culture of white supremacy. At worst, the course could serve to undermine higher education's black history offerings while continuing the trend that AP has already posed for post-secondary educators. Will this course aim higher and emphasize writing, interdisciplinary research, and historicize the value of source material? Or will it simply offer a class that dovetails all too nicely with the existing conservative test prep orthodoxy and cater to predictable socio-economic groupings?

Perhaps, the balanced, fair, and correct assessment is to cheer on the AP African American Studies course because it is the only thing we can do. There is nothing that says that this course cannot be an agent for change in other areas of schooling. If the emergence of any one AP course could cause a groundswell in education, it is the hope of many to be this one. Certain schools have abandoned Advanced Placement courses for the issues and questions discussed here but by no means are they likely to go away. Just as identity in America is a very complicated topic, so is the potential value of this course. There is no question that regardless of its successes or failures, AP African American Studies is a humane, appropriate, and just idea and has the capacity to empower many people across the educational landscape.

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