

...AND HOW NOT TO

A Critique of the Portland Baseline Essays

BY ERICH MARTEL

TEACHERS, PARENTS, and students are justified in wanting multi-cultural curricula that reflect the achievements of the world's diverse cultures. Older curricula often reflect a bias that denied or neglected the genuine contributions of Africa. But teachers who want reliable information on African and African-American history often don't know where to turn. Many have unfortunately looked to unreliable books and publications by Afrocentric writers.

The term "Afrocentrism" has engendered semantic confusion, meaning different things to different people. Some scholars, such as Russell Adams, chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department at Howard University, describe several types of Afrocentrism, ranging from a curricular emphasis on Afro-American culture and heritage, on the one hand, to undocumented assertions and pseudoscience, on the other. In this article, I use the term to connote undocumented assertions about the African past. This is the most commonly employed usage of the term in the general media and in academic critiques of Afrocentrism, such as those by Howard University classicist Frank Snowden, and Kwame Anthony Appiah of Harvard's Department of Afro-American Studies. Appiah describes an "Afrocentric paradigm," which holds that "Western scholarship . . . is hopelessly Eurocentric" having "concealed facts about the African origins of certain central elements of Western civilization" and which assumes "a single African culture, shared by everyone from the civilizations of the Upper Nile thousands of years ago to the thousand or so language zones of contemporary Africa."¹

The African American Baseline Essays,² developed by the school system in Portland, Oregon, are among the most widespread Afrocentric teacher resources. Educators should be aware of their crippling flaws.

The essays divide into six separate sections, each trying to detail African and African-American contributions to art, language arts, math, music, and science; the history essay aims to survey political developments from ancient times to the recent past. These essays might as well be called "Egypt-centric," however, since so much of their content revolves around ancient Egypt. Openly disdainful of professional Egyptologists, most of the authors attempt major revisions of ancient Egyptian history. Although they claim to advance long ignored facts and to cor-

rect Eurocentric distortions of history, many of their claims and theories turn out to be little more than "Africanized" versions of discredited and discarded European ideas.

A 19th century conception of race binds the essays together. They try to portray all Africans across thousands of years and miles as part of a single "race" and culture simply on the basis of a few observable physical features, such as skin color and hair form. According to Philip Curtin, a professor of African history at Johns Hopkins University, "The fundamental problem is that [the social studies essay] puts forward racial theories that have been long ago abandoned by mainline scholars of Africa."³

Despite this, the essays' many inaccuracies have gained a foothold in a number of school districts. Two widely reported distortions are that ancient Egypt was a black nation and that the achievements of ancient Greece had African origins.

■ "Ancient Egypt was a black nation" or Egypt was "The Land of the Blacks," claim the essays on art and music.

"Black" and "white" are hard to define. Ancient Egyptian and Greek views of skin color were not the products of a legacy of racial discrimination, as they are in the modern United States. According to Frank J. Yurco, an Egyptologist at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, these terms are simply a "chimera—cultural baggage from our own society that can only be imposed artificially on ancient Egyptian society."⁴ Moreover, Yurco points to studies in physical anthropology and ancient Egyptian art that suggest the ancient Egyptians "were of varying complexions of color, from the light Mediterranean type (like Queen Nefertiti), to the light brown of Middle Egypt, to the darker brown of Upper Egypt, to the darkest shade around Aswan and the First Cataract region, where even

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today, the population shifts to Nubian.”⁵

The phrase “Land of the Blacks” is a mistranslation of the ancient Egyptian word “KMT” (Kemet). It means “the black land,” and refers to the black alluvial soil deposited by the Nile’s yearly flooding, not the skin color of nearby residents. “KMT” contrasts the word “Deshret,” or “the red land,” which refers to the surrounding desert. The ancient Egyptians, who owed their lives to the Nile and the soil it made rich, often called themselves “the people of the black land.”⁶

Linguistic, pictographic, and archaeological evidence point primarily to a Saharan origin of the ancient Egyptians from the west, not the south. This migration occurred following the gradual desiccation of the Sahara after 5500 B.C.E.⁷

Studies do show the early pre-dynastic (pre-3150 B.C.E.) population of southern (“Upper”) Egypt having affinities with tropical Africans.⁸ A recent study comparing pre-dynastic crania from northern (“Lower”) Egypt with those from Europe and several regions in Africa concluded that “the attempt to force the Egyptians into either a ‘black’ or a ‘white’ category has no biological justification. . . . Egypt was basically Egyptian from the Neolithic right up to historic times.”⁹

■ **“The African Origins of Greek development [were] an unquestioned reality of the Greeks,” according to the art essay, or “Egypt gave birth to . . . Western civilization,” claims the social studies essay.**

A central Afrocentrist tenet is the claim in the social studies essay that ancient Egypt was “the first great civilization” and that it was pivotal in the formation of Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, and ultimately Western civilization. In addition, several of the essays include bibliographical sources that propose the even more radical claim that other geographically distant civilizations, such as the Olmec of Mesoamerica, were heavily influenced by ancient Egypt.

Egypt and Mesopotamia shared contemporaneous beginnings in the late 4th Millennium. Contact and, consequently, two-way “borrowings” in the realms of culture and technology took place. Nonetheless, both trace their origins and development primarily to local factors. While Egypt (and Mesopotamia via the Phoenicians) did make important contributions to ancient Greece, indigenous Greek achievements were central to that process.¹⁰ Scholars of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica see the origins of Olmec civilization and its artifacts in indigenous, not Egyptian, influences.¹¹

OTHER PROBLEMS with the Portland essays run much deeper. Worldwide phenomena such as pentatonic scale in music, use of prophecy, body language, creation stories, rock art, as well as the earliest pottery, sculpture, and musical instruments are often described as if they originated in Africa. Features that might be considered unique to Africa, such as trickster stories, are not highlighted at all. According to George Washington University anthropologist Alison Brooks, a specialist in prehistoric African archaeology, dates and dynasties are confused. In addition, dates and periods overlap, contradict each other, and are not consistent among the six essays. In the social studies essay, for example, almost all the dates associated with human evolutionary stages are

incorrect according to current evidence.¹²

The “Science and Technology” essay endorses pseudo-scientific notions, including “the extra-terrestrial origin of the Nile” and “water-laden micro-comets” as the source of the oceans. The author misinterprets a small bird effigy in the Cairo Museum as a model of a glider and writes that ancient Egyptians developed full-sized gliders 4,000 years ago and “used their early planes for travel expeditions and recreation.” He attributes mystical powers to the pyramids and misinterprets artifacts in trying to show that the ancient Egyptians experimented with antennae and electricity. He also makes the startling claim that “for the ancient Egyptians as well as contemporary Africans worldwide, there is no distinction and thus no separation between science and religion.”

Bernard Ortiz de Montellano, a professor of anthropology at Wayne State University in Detroit, comments that “the ‘science’ that the essay describes is pseudo science—a farrago of unsubstantiated and outrageous claims, arguments for the existence of the paranormal, and advocacy of the supernatural as an integral part of science.”¹³ Writing in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, Irving Klotz, professor emeritus of chemistry at Northwestern University, notes that “[t]he most devastating effect of the spread of this kind of material taught in the Portland Baseline Essays will be the inculcation in a generation of young people of an uncritical, superficial attitude toward science.”¹⁴

Even the portion of the essay devoted to African-American scientists contains easily avoided inaccuracies. The essay states that “Thomas Jefferson appointed Benjamin Banneker to survey the site for the capital, Washington, D.C.,” and that Banneker “wrote a proposal for the establishment of a United States Department of Peace.” Had the author consulted *The Life of Benjamin Banneker* by Silvio Bedini, which is considered the definitive biography, he would have discovered no evidence for these claims. Jefferson appointed Andrew Ellicott to conduct the survey; Ellicott made Banneker his assistant for roughly three months in 1791. Benjamin Rush authored the “Department of Peace” proposal; the confusion arose among earlier biographers because the proposal appeared in Banneker’s 1793 almanac.¹⁵

Another telling inaccuracy lies in repeating the widely circulated rumor that Dr. Charles Drew, who pioneered blood plasma storage, died after an auto accident because “not one of several nearby white hospitals would provide the blood transfusions he so desperately needed.” In the 1982 *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, however, historian Rayford Logan writes, “Conflicting versions to the contrary, Drew received prompt medical attention.”¹⁶ *The Washington Post* recently reported that Charlene Drew Jarvis, the daughter of Dr. Charles Drew, is actively trying to “destroy the myth” about the mistreatment of her famous father because she “discovered in her work on the local board of the American Red Cross that some African Americans cite the story of discrimination against her father” as one of the reasons for not donating blood or organs.¹⁷

At best, the essays’ errors demonstrate a severe amount of sloppiness; at worst, they reveal an ideologically driven willingness to prefer the claims of non-specialists over the documented research of trained professionals. The most flagrant example of this is the author

of the science essay. Although credited as a "research scientist" at Argonne National Laboratories, he is described by the Director of Public Information at Argonne as an industrial hygiene technician with a high school diploma.¹⁸

The Portland Baseline Essays do contain some accurate information. The math essay's coverage of ancient Egypt includes a good deal of reliable information. The art, language arts, and music essays, despite many errors in their coverage of ancient Egypt, appear to treat their African-American sections accurately. Nevertheless, the essays as a whole are seriously flawed. Teachers who look to the Portland essays to infuse African historical content into their classes face an impossible task: how to sift reliable information from the specious.

HENRY LOUIS Gates, Jr., chair of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, points out the dangers this kind of Afrocentrism poses to the field of Afro-American studies: "For our field to survive, we need to encourage a true proliferation of rigorous methodologies, rather than seek ideological conformity. African American studies should be the home of free inquiry into the very complexity of being of African descent in the world, rather than a place where critical inquiry is drowned out by ethnic fundamentalism."¹⁹

If they are to gain acceptance, revisionist interpretations of history must be based upon impeccable and thorough research. The historiography of American history is replete with examples of inaccuracies and outright myths that were shattered by scholarly revisionist research. Such outstanding scholars as W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin, C. Vann Woodward, and Kenneth Stampp were among the many who played crucial roles in opening up textbooks and curricula to the African-American experience. Because of solid grounding, their research withstood criticism and could not be ignored. By contrast, the Afrocentrist historical revisions, such as those contained in the African-American Baseline Essays, are outside this rigorous tradition of scholarship. Most of the consultants and authors of the Portland essays are not professional scholars of ancient Egyptian or African history. Frank Snowden, professor emeritus of classics at Howard University and author of *Blacks in Antiquity and Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, has analyzed many of the Afrocentric writings on ancient history upon which the essays' Afrocentric claims are based. These writings are listed in the essays' bibliographies. Snowden states:

"Though Afrocentrists may be competent in their own specialties, many of their statements about blacks in the ancient world demonstrate clearly that they have not approached the ancient evidence with the relevant scholarly apparatus. Many shortcomings have resulted: unfamiliarity with and a failure to use primary sources; a reliance on the undocumented opinions of fellow Afrocentrists (always the same few); a tendency to make general statements on the basis of a few lines from a single author or from a few texts without considering the total picture of blacks in antiquity; the use of language charged with political rhetoric; and a tendency to read a 'white conspiracy' into scholarly interpretations of the ancient evidence.

"... Many students already have been misled and confused by the inaccuracies and omissions [of Afrocentrism] . . . but the damage to future generations is incalculable if this trend continues."²⁰

The real solution is for teachers to stay informed of developments in their fields of study. They should read professional journals, attend conferences, and establish links to local universities and museums. They should consult the growing number of serious scholars of the African past and of the more recent African-American experience. They should argue among themselves in faculty lounges. They should remain open to new ideas, but always skeptical of dramatic and revisionist claims. While modern views of the past constantly change as new data emerge and new interpretations come forth, all of us should employ caution when confronted by claims purporting to reveal a "real truth" that sweeps away well-documented information about the past. □

END NOTES

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- 2 Asa Hilliard & Carolyn Leonard (eds.), *African American Baseline Essays*. (Portland, OR: Portland Public Schools, 1990).
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- 6 Frank Yurco, Letter to author, June 4, 1990.
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- 17 Patrice Gains, "Armed with the Truth in a Fight for Lives." *The Washington Post* (April 10, 1994), p. B-5.
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