

## Introduction to the Forum: Teaching History in Contentious Times

In January of 2023, *World History Connected's* Editor, Marc Jason Gilbert, informed me that the Forum in its previous issue was devoted to the examination of the current trend in revisions of World History Standards and allied curriculum. As he wished to extend that discussion, he asked me if I could develop into a second Forum on that issue from the oral presentations at the Roundtable I had organized, with Barbara Winslow in the chair, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), which was sponsored by the *Radical History Review* and “Historians for Peace and Democracy.”<sup>1</sup> That invitation has led to this Forum, which offers in edited form the presentations of eight public secondary school social studies and historians, and also my own, as a Hofstra University teacher educator, and a former New York City high school teacher. Each of the articles in the Forum discusses the pressures teachers face as they grapple with a widely known and studied national campaign by conservative politicians and organizations to restrict what gets taught in schools.<sup>2</sup>

The secondary school teachers included Cynthia Vitere who teaches at Southside High School in Rockville Centre, New York; Jazmin Puicon a teacher at Bard High School Early College in Newark, New Jersey; Romelo Green who teaches middle school and high school in Bellport, New York; Dawn Sumner McShane a teacher at A.B.G. Schultz Middle School in Hempstead, New York; Imani Hinson, who teaches high school in Columbia, Maryland and is a curriculum developer with the Uncommon Charter School Network; Christopher Dier, a former Louisiana Teacher of the Year, who is a teacher at Benjamin Franklin High School in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana; Adeola Tella-Williams who teaches at Uniondale High School in Uniondale, New York; and Pablo Muriel, a teacher at Alfred E. Smith High School in Bronx, New York who is also an adjunct assistant professor at Hofstra University. Pablo Muriel and Alan Singer are co-authors of *Supporting Civics Education with Student Activism: Citizens for a Democratic Society* (Routledge, 2021).

Pablo Muriel provided useful comments after these presentations were originally offered. He recognized that every one of the presenters should consider themselves an

educational activist. Muriel explained that as a result of his participation on the panel, he no longer felt as isolated as a teacher committed to teaching the truth, something that he struggles with at his school where many of the other teachers do not share his commitment to engage students in an active examination of the past and its implications for understanding the present.

Muriel then offered the following very brief summary of the articles. He noted how my presentation identified some of the threats that teachers face; how Cynthia Vitere argued that teachers are the stewards of democracy and that if they do not perform this role, it is very uncertain who in American society will pick up the mantle; how Jazmin Puicon stressed the importance of finding outlets for taking what the students learn in the classroom outside into the broader world so that students realize that the meaning of what they learn in school does not stop at the classroom; how Romelo Green's championed the idea that teachers have both a right and an obligation to their students to teach the truth, while Dawn Sumner McShane spoke about creating classroom communities that ensure every student has a voice, communities where they don't worry about having the right answer but experience figuring things out together. There was no arguing with Imani Hinson's assertion that there is an important difference between difficult and controversial topics and that many difficult topics are not controversial at all. There is no other side to the horrors of the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jewry. The existence of chattel slavery in the Americas and the attempt by Europeans to dehumanize Africans is a historical fact, not a subject for debate. Christopher Drier argued that to find success in advocating for students, teachers must cross district, state, and subject lines and involve other stakeholders concerned about education and that there are ways that teachers can circumvent some of the legal restrictions being imposed by state legislatures and teach in responsible ways, while Adeola Tella-Williams argued that teaching controversial topics is fundamental to teaching and engaging students, especially Black and Brown students, because it transforms them from being passive learners into active learners who see the importance of what they are studying to their lives and the lives of people in their communities.

## **Conclusion**

This Forum compliments its predecessor in many ways, such as the manner in which Christopher Drier lays stress on the importance of coalition building geographically as well as locally, and that there are positive, and legal ways, of circumventing partisan state rules so as to preserve proven teaching methods and practices. However, its principle value resides in the space it has provided for the original insights and specific experiences offered by classroom teachers who are bearing the burden of politicized curricular reforms that threaten to impede their students' knowledge of both the larger world, and the communities in which they live.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Historians for Peace and Democracy,” accessed May 10, 2023 at <https://www.historiansforpeace.org/>

<sup>2</sup> See for example, “Akilah Alleyne, “Book Banning, Curriculum Restrictions, and the Politicization of U.S. Schools,” *Report*, Center for American Progress, September 19, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/book-banning-curriculum-restrictions-and-the-politicization-of-u-s-schools/> ; Collin Binkley and Julie Carr Smyth, “Conservative PACs inject millions into local school races,” *AP News*, October 11, 2022 ; Bryan Anderson, “Critical race theory is a flashpoint for conservatives, but what does it mean?” *Associated Press*, updated, November 4, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/so-much-buzz-but-what-is-critical-race-theory/>; Zinn Educational Project, “Right-Wing Campaign to Block Teaching for Social Justice, March 31, 2023,” <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/gop-campaign-to-block-teaching-for-social-justice/>.