

February 2, 2025

To: Berne G. Christiansen, Assistant Director, Office of Undergraduate Education

From: Yuichiro Onishi, Associate Professor, Department of African American & African Studies

Re: Revision to the Social Sciences Core Proposal (AFRO 1012)

Dear Ms. Christiansen,

Thank you for allowing me to submit the revised Social Sciences Core explanation for **AFRO 1012: Black Worlds in Global Perspectives**. In what follows, I explain the manner in which I took up the task of sharpening Criterion #2 in the course syllabus (attached): “Students manipulate social science data (primary or secondary) using one or more of the primary quantitative or qualitative methods for collecting and/or analyzing these data.”

### Context Setting

Criterion #2 is of utmost importance to what we do in the Department of African American & African Studies. We who are in African Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and African American Studies take up a very distinct stance; we place front and center the critique of coloniality and Eurocentric knowledge production. We interrogate the epistemic foundations from which objects of knowledge are constituted in the academy, including in social sciences.

At a deeper theoretical and conceptual level, I foreground the relationship between the discipline of sociology (as well as related public and social policy studies) and the authority of W. E. B. Du Bois’s thought. Du Bois serves an essential guide to rework the thrust of this course. This relationship is one of a dialectical one: Black thought and agency structured in dominance.

This orientation does offer concrete ways in which students and the instructor can learn to navigate the challenge of how to “manipulate social science data.” The objective is to critically evaluate and at times skewer an object of knowledge in service of minoritization (processes of disenfranchisement). We also seek out *grounded knowledge* of communities in struggle. To put it differently, the course posits “social sciences” as the site of struggle over knowledge. It is contested, and politics and power are bound up.

### Details

The course is roughly divided into two parts. Part I exposes students to the authority of the Black intellectual tradition. How do Du Bois and other Black scholars and thinkers, then and now, trouble the discipline of sociology and related fields in social sciences, including history? How do they interrogate racism within humanistic social sciences? What concepts, analytics, methods, and radical visions do they proffer to rethink and rework how to be in the world? The goal is to provide the necessary language of critique to familiarize ourselves with the important task of interrogating dominant forms of knowledge that deny the agency of global African peoples. In these weeks, I rely

on In-Class Writing Assignments (total of five) to help cultivate students' faculty of thinking about the dialectical relationship between domination and resistance. Students will discover how Black scholars amount a critique. Students will also be exposed to the use of primary data (in this case, the interviews of Somali youth) to produce critical knowledge that aligns with the critical stance-taking of this course. Finally, we will learn to tease out limitations of public policy directives by bringing into conversations the insights of critical scholars and activists.

Part II will take students into the domain of the *grounded knowledge* of community members in the Environmental Justice Movement. Over the last three years, led by Dr. Rose Brewer, our department has forged the grant-funded "[Humanities Without Walls](#)" project centered on the local campaign to shut down the trash incinerator in North Minneapolis, also known as the Hennepin Energy Recover Center (HERC). It is a waste-to-energy trash burning facility that is considered dirtier than coal burning.

In the process, we generated various forms of knowledge that contest the Hennepin County directives of trash incineration, which align with the national and international trends. In the second half of this course, the instructor will take the students on the journey that we have charted so that they can learn to grapple with how the insurgent form of grounded knowledge, both in Minneapolis and across the Global South, has come out to contest and delegitimize the policy plans and priorities of powerful stakeholders in the solid waste industry, key federal agencies, waste-to-energy technology experts, and government officials.

Our learning will be guided by the following questions: (1) What is HERC?; (2) How did it get here?; (3) Why is it bad?; and (4) What do we do about it? Each question is a flashpoint that allows us raise collective concerns about public policy and social science-based knowledge still tethered to a business model rather than popular education and bottom-up directives to harness grounded knowledge of community members and their supporters, including educators, public health experts, labor organizers, and medical professionals. This tension is at the core of Criterion #2. The critical analysis assignment, due at the end, responds to the last question, in particular, to present what Environmental Justice Worldmaking can look like going forward after HERC.