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Beyond Sound Bites, Stereotypes, and Blame-Placing: A Historical Analysis of the Interethnic Violence at South Philadelphia High School

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Abstract

—Asian students say black students routinely pelt them with food, beat, punch and kick them in school hallways and bathrooms, and hurl racial epithets....¹ This quote from the January 22, 2010, edition of USA Today describes Asian students' account of their experience with violence and harassment at the hands of a group of predominantly African-American students at South Philadelphia High School. Various media outlets reported that a group of primarily African-American students attacked approximately 30 Asian students in the high school lunchroom. Subsequently, Asian students boycotted the school for more than a week and returned to school on December 16, 2009. Shortly thereafter, the School Reform Commission began hearings to investigate the series of events and hear the Asian students' testimonies.

Keywords

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“Asian students say black students routinely pelt them with food, beat, punch and kick them in school hallways and bathrooms, and hurl racial epithets....”¹ This quote from the January 22, 2010, edition of *USA Today* describes Asian students’ account of their experience with violence and harassment at the hands of a group of predominantly African-American students at South Philadelphia High School. Various media outlets reported that a group of primarily African-American students attacked approximately thirty Asian students in the high school lunchroom. Subsequently, Asian students boycotted the school for more than a week and returned to school on December 16, 2009. Shortly thereafter, the School Reform Commission began hearings to investigate the series of events and hear the Asian students’ testimonies.

This is the perspective that most media outlets have provided. However, the incident and its aftermath may be even more complicated than the Asian students facing harassment and boycotting the school. Philadelphia’s African-American newspaper, *The Philadelphia Tribune*, was the only media outlet to discuss this incident with African-American students to understand their perspective on the events and aftermath. Additionally, most later coverage of the violence focused solely on the Asian students protesting and awaiting the conclusion of the School Reform Commission’s investigation, while ignoring the suggestion of earlier coverage that the December 3 attacks may have been retaliation for Asian students’ assault on a disabled African-American student.² Therefore, it is important to consider other perspectives on the violence. In order to have a more complete

understanding of the December 2009 violence, I will contextualize the incident within the long history of interethnic violence in South Philadelphia and provide perspectives of the account from South Philadelphia High School teachers, administrators, students, and various news outlets.³

History of Interethnic Violence in South Philadelphia (1840s-1960s)

Contrary to the sensationalist media coverage of the December 2009 violence at South Philadelphia High School, there has always been interethnic violence in South Philadelphia. In fact, this violence has a long history that dates back to the nineteenth-century. The interethnic violence that I will discuss occurred between white men in rival ethnic and religious firehouses in nineteenth-century Philadelphia and later, in the twentieth century, between whites and blacks at Bok Vocational High School.⁴

Violence between firemen of different religions and/or ethnicities flourished in nineteenth-century Philadelphia as a result of external forces disrupting centuries of established socialization patterns. During the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, Philadelphia functioned less like a big city and more like a small town.⁵ In this period before the Industrial Revolution, workplace and home neighborhoods were unified, and there were abundant opportunities for social interaction. Many artisans who worked from home cherished their ability to work at their leisure, and debated their contemporaries about politics on the eve of the American Revolution in nearby coffee shops and taverns.⁶ These components were integral to social life because they informed many male Philadelphians' identity of independence. The Industrial Revolution forever altered these familiar rhythms of daily life. The noxious fumes that factories produced as a by-product of their functions caused employers and workers to live in separate neighborhoods from the ones in which they worked, in order to preserve their quality of life. This separation of work and home neighborhoods was another affront to the former artisans' culture, especially to the ease with which informal street life had been conducted.

The dramatic increase in immigration during the nineteenth-century also disrupted Philadelphia's communal atmosphere. Immigration upset Philadelphia's small-town atmosphere not only by creating a dramatic increase in the number of people who were unfamiliar to native-born Philadelphians, but by also creating a huge demand for housing stock to accommodate these newcomers. As a consequence of this building boom that lasted from the 1840s to the 1870s, the city lacked shops, public buildings, and "...gathering places that might have assisted in focusing the daily activities of neighborhoods."⁷ In addition to having few public spaces in which to interact and being surrounded with people of different cultures, Philadelphians found that further separation of work and home neighborhoods also proved damaging to community life. As a result of the loss of identity and new socialization patterns that the changes brought about, male Philadelphians of every religion and ethnic background rushed to join firehouses and other voluntary organizations to create new traditions and identities.⁸

Some young men chose to associate themselves with firehouses whose members were of similar ethnic/religious affiliations because they provided new traditions and additional opportunities for socialization, but also allowed them to "...regulate who lived near them, who socialized at their pubs and taverns, and which companies serviced their people."⁹ Neighborhoods were often defined by ethnicity or religion, so several fire companies emerged to "protect" their neighborhoods from "undesirable" people or influences. Therefore, several firehouses and engine companies existed to defend each neighborhood from people of different backgrounds. For example, the Irish-Catholic members of the Moyamensing Hose Company often fought members of the Shiffler Hose Company, who held both anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments.¹⁰ There were often skirmishes between members of the Weccahoe and Southwark engine companies.¹¹ Riots involving rival fire companies resulted in shootings and deaths.¹² Nineteenth-century interethnic violence between rival firehouses came to an end when professional police associations were established later in the century.¹³

Philadelphia's interethnic violence transformed in the 1960s, and was triggered by African-Americans' migration to Philadelphia in large numbers. From the 1920s through the 1960s, the Great Migration transformed the racial composition of many Northern cities, like Philadelphia, from predominantly white to increasingly African-American. As a result of Philadelphia's changing racial demography, not only did Philadelphia's neighborhoods become more diverse, but neighborhood schools became more diverse as well. Demographic shifts combined with the school system's decision to track African-American students into vocational schools made South Philadelphia's Bok Vocational High School more than 80% African-American in a still predominantly Italian-American neighborhood.¹⁴ The changes to the racial composition of Bok Vocational High School and the South Philadelphia neighborhood did not go unnoticed by white residents. African-American students often faced violence and harassment from Italian-American students when travelling to and from school. African-American students also reported white South Philadelphians calling them racial epithets and throwing trash at them during their 10-block walk through the neighborhood to the school.¹⁵

Bok Vocational High School: A Precursor to South Philadelphia High School?

Bok Vocational High School was a microcosm of the interethnic violence in South Philadelphia in the 1960s. Principal Edwin Fee contributed to the tension between Italian-American and African-American students. He bred hostility between the students by describing African-American students as "so dumb that they will not even be able to qualify for college should they desire to go," subsequently refusing to raise the curricular standards of the school and returning Board of Education scholarships designed for college-bound students, implying that no students were qualified to accept them.¹⁶ Additionally, the vice principal, Clayton W. Wylam, did not recommend that the African-American valedictorian attend college because "it was felt that she did not have the necessary subjects to qualify her for higher learning."¹⁷ It is plausible that Dr. Fee's

racist words and his (and other administrators') discriminatory actions as an administrator, authority figure, and someone who shared the same racial background as the residents of the 95% white surrounding community¹⁸ implicitly encouraged some Italian-Americans to mistreat African-American students. Parents of Italian-American students may have been emboldened by school administrators' behavior and chose to protest at surrounding schools, like South Philadelphia High School, after a series of racial conflicts between students took place throughout the fall and summer of 1968.¹⁹ These white parents staged counter protests to African-American students' and adults' protests and boycotts; these African-Americans' protests were in response to the violence at Bok and other high schools throughout the city.

The tension between Italian-American and African-American students at Bok Vocational High School bears a resemblance to the recent violence between Asian and African-American students at South Philadelphia High School. As previously mentioned, several neighborhood conflicts took place between Italian-American and African-American students over the course of the fall and summer of 1968. On Wednesday, October 2, a group of black youths stabbed a white student from Bishop Neumann, a Catholic high school in South Philadelphia, less than five blocks away from Bok.²⁰ False rumors of the white student's death circulated throughout the neighborhood, and although the black student who was arrested for the stabbing did not attend Bok, some white South Philadelphians organized a drive to close the high school.²¹ Over the course of the following week, white residents retaliated by throwing rocks at the Bok football team's bus to the game against South Philadelphia High School, three to four hundred students from Bok tried to storm the gates at South Philadelphia High School, and on Monday, October 7, two hundred black students walked out of Bok to protest the neighborhood harassment.²²

The conflicts between African-American and Italian-American residents and students are similar to the violence between Asian and African-American students because both incidents involved rumors that fueled additional conflict between both groups, as well as attacked students

leaving their school in protest. Additionally, both instances may have involved school administrators taking an active role in creating environments conducive to interethnic tension. The principal of South Philadelphia High School—LaGreta Brown—behaved in a manner similar to Bok Vocational High School principal Edwin Fee. She, like Dr. Fee, may have acted in a way and used language that could have created an environment that emboldened some students to harass and eventually attack another group of students. Prior to the December 3, 2009, assault, Principal Brown reportedly prevented African-American students from entering the school’s English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) wing, where many non-English-speaking Asian students were taught English. She also allegedly referred to the ESOL wing of the building as a “dynasty,” and questioned why Asian students were disproportionately represented in the National Honor Society.²³ Preventing the African-American students from entering the ESOL wing could have caused some African-American students to resent the Asian students who took classes there because of a potential perception that these Asian students received special treatment. Referring to the ESOL wing as a “dynasty” also racialized this space in a negative way. Similar to the circumstances surrounding Bok, it is likely that Principal Brown’s choice of words and actions when dealing with the Asian students at the high school contributed to a toxic environment in which these students felt and may have been victimized by the African-American students who composed 64.4% of the student body.²⁴

A Chronology of the December 2009 Violence at South Philadelphia High School

In addition to knowing the history of interethnic violence in Philadelphia, it is also necessary to understand the tension between both groups of students, beyond thirty-second sound bites that media outlets like Philadelphia’s *Action News* provide. Retired U.S. District Court Judge James T. Giles was commissioned by the School District to publish an independent report that recounted the violence on December 2–3 based on interviews with Asian students, school police, school administrators including former principal LaGreta Brown, and ESOL teachers. It is worth noting that

the report does not mention violence against the Asian students before December 2009,²⁵ which may have been due to a limited budget, and did not take advantage of the opportunity to address the causes of long-standing racial and ethnic tension at the high school.²⁶ Released in late February 2010, the Giles Report suggests: “The events that occurred on December 3, 2009 were probably triggered by in-school and out-of-school events that occurred on December 2, 2009 involving two groups of individuals.”²⁷ There were a few rumored incidents of tension or violence that day, three in school and one after school.

The first in-school incident allegedly took place when a Vietnamese student bumped an African-American student and did not apologize. Some African-American students may have understood this action as an invitation to fight after school. This invitation was compounded by what the African-American students perceived to be a racial slur spoken in Vietnamese.²⁸ These African-American students may have recognized this Vietnamese phrase through informal associations with Vietnamese people.²⁹ Another confrontation took place during third period, when a Cambodian female challenged three Vietnamese students to fight before an African-American male senior who seemed to know her pulled her to safety. Later, during lunch, an African-American male student walked up to a Vietnamese student, pulled the earphones out of his ears, and cursed at him.³⁰ Accounts of what truly transpired during the after-school scuffle between Asian and African-American students at the corner of Broad and Snyder Avenues vary. Some of these accounts depict a disabled African-American male—who was uninvolved with the conflict—being assaulted by Asian students. Other versions of the account depict three Vietnamese students being attacked at the hands of a group of African-American male and female students and a Cambodian female. A final version of the account depicts 13 to 14 African-American students attacking five Vietnamese students while they were walking home from school near the Walgreens and Footlocker stores on Broad Street.³¹

Rumors of the previous day’s attacks may have fueled the December 3 assault on Asian students. It is possible that both groups of students feared retaliation for the prior day’s events, and

felt that further attacks against Asian students would take place the following day.³² Some evidence suggests that during first period, some African-American students were seen walking around the second floor, which contains the ESOL classes, looking into classrooms for specific students. One student was heard saying, “c’mon, he’s not here” when looking for a particular student.³³ At approximately 8:45 A.M., a group of predominantly African-American students attacked an Asian student when class had been dismissed.³⁴ A witness to this attack identified two people who were involved with the previous day’s Walgreens incident, including the disabled student. This detail implies that the victim of this attack was identified by the African-American students as having been involved with the previous incident, and that they attacked him in retaliation.

At approximately 10:30 A.M., a group of seven to eight African-American students yelled at Asian students after the school sergeant left his room in order to escort the Asian students from the first to the second floor. The sergeant ordered the African-American students to go to class. Most of the students complied with the sergeant’s command, except for one African-American student whom the sergeant had to physically restrain and have the school police escort to the Dean’s office.³⁵ The sergeant then took the Asian students to room 217A.

Sometime prior to or after the lunchroom attacks that took place that afternoon, thirty to forty African-American students tried to enter the second floor from stairway #5.³⁶ As this surge took place, Principal LaGreta Brown and other adults on the floor moved the Asian students from the hallway to nearby classrooms. Asian students had been told to stay with ESOL teachers on the second floor. Assistant Principal Juanita Johnson arranged for lunch to be delivered to the Asian students, but some Asian students went to the lunchroom. Other Asian students on the second floor said that the principal assured them that it was safe to enter the lunchroom.³⁷

The lunchroom attacks took place first in the lunchroom hallway and then in the lunchroom sometime between sixth and seventh lunch periods. Security camera footage of the lunchroom hallway shows a wave of sixty to seventy mostly African-American students attacking a group of

mostly Asian students. There is circumstantial evidence that the attacks were not random. Security camera footage shows some Asian students eating lunch even while the attacks were occurring. Furthermore, one student stated that he was about to be attacked, but one of his would-be attackers told the group, “Not that guy, he is my friend.”³⁸ A lunchroom worker who worked at the deli station that day recalled that the lunchroom attacks started with African-American students approaching, and then attacking three Asian students who were standing in line at the deli station. According to one teacher, Ms. Lawson, the attacks in the lunchroom occurred minutes after the attacks in the hallway. The lunchroom worker vividly recalls Ms. Lawson shielding the Asian students from the African-American students.³⁹ The lunchroom attack was relatively short, lasting approximately 10 seconds before Ms. Lawson can be seen on the security footage putting out her arms to protect the Asian students and yelling at the African-American students to stop.⁴⁰ School police, City Year volunteers, and other officials responded quickly. School police and other officers secured the area. The video shows Ms. Lawson escorting the Asian students out of the lunchroom. Lunch service resumed soon thereafter.⁴¹

The last incident on December 3 took place after school on Broad Street as South Philadelphia High School officials were escorting some Asian students down the street. Some Vietnamese students were assaulted after they ran ahead of the group of adults—which consisted of Principal LaGreta Brown and other school officials—possibly out of fear of being attacked by additional African-American students.⁴² After crossing over Passyunk Avenue, a group of mostly African-American students approached them from the front and another group of people approached the Asian students from behind. A crowd of approximately 100 spectators surrounded them, further separating the Vietnamese students from their escorts.⁴³ The attack was quick and involved twenty to forty males and females. The Vietnamese students who were attacked perceived most of their assailants as African-American, though the Vietnamese students whom the Giles Commission interviewed believed that there were some white and Cambodian people involved as well.⁴⁴ Whether

these white and Cambodian individuals were affiliated with the school is unknown. However, the South Philadelphia High School staff recognized the Cambodian female who was involved with this incident as having been linked to the previous day's attacks.

Media, School Officials,' Asian Students', and African-American Students' Perspectives of the Violence

According to high school senior Duong Ly, the assaults that occurred on December 3, 2009, took place in two separate episodes—in the morning and in the afternoon.⁴⁵ Duong did not witness the morning incident, but he vividly recalls the lunchroom attacks:

I was in line for lunch, and I saw thirty to forty students rushing towards the back door of the cafeteria, and some of them attacked two or three Chinese students. Luckily, [a] school staff [aide] intervened, and she used her body to prevent us from being attacked. We were told to go into another room, in the basement. And then we were told to go to the second floor, to the ESOL room (English Speakers of Other Languages)...For some reason, the principal [LaGreta Brown] announced over the PA system, that Asian students were to go to their ninth period classes...⁴⁶

Duong's eyewitness account of the lunchroom assault on Asian students by a group of African-American students is important, but it needs to be understood within the context of narratives presented by local and national media outlets. Some sources such as *USA Today* state that fifty Asian students were attacked.⁴⁷ Others, such as local Philadelphia news website *NBC Philadelphia*, state that thirty students were assaulted.⁴⁸ The number of attackers is important because it appears that not even officials charged with investigating the incidents or media outlets know exactly how many students were assaulted or how many students assaulted the Asian students, given the fact the attacks occurred during three phases—in the morning, during school, and after school. Not even Otis Hackney—the new principal who later replaced LaGreta Brown after it was discovered that she lacked the credentials to be a high school principal—knew exactly how many students were involved in the violence. The fact that former Principal Brown allowed African-American students and Asian students to leave the school at the same time may have put more

students in danger when walking home from school. Duong describes this attack, saying: “We then learned that 10 students who were my friends were attacked by a group of [African-American] students on the street while they were walking home. 6 or 7 of them were girls. 6 or 7 of them [the attacked students] had to go to the hospital.” There might even be more direct evidence of Principal Brown’s role in students being attacked after school. According to Duong, “She [Principal LaGreta Brown] actually promised to walk my friend home. Then, my friend was chased and attacked [he didn’t have an escort home].” Moreover, Principal Brown did not send a letter to the students’ homes following the attacks.⁴⁹

Many Asian students boycotted classes in response to the attacks and likely as a result of Principal Brown’s response to the violence, and did not return to school until Wednesday, December 16, 2009. Another consequence of the attacks was the suspension and possible expulsion of six African-American and four Asian students.⁵⁰ Based on a December 15, 2009 clip from Philadelphia ABC’s *Action News*, the alleged attackers were not solely African-American students; they were Asian students as well. The description of the attackers is one of the many details where Duong’s narrative and chronology of the violence diverges from other narratives presented by local and national media, administrators, other students, and activists. Thus, it is necessary to compare and contrast Duong Ly’s chronology of the events with other descriptions.

The majority of the coverage of the attacks at South Philadelphia High School focused on the violence against Asian students, and their perspectives. A December 6, 2009, nbcphiladelphia.com article titled “Attacked Asian Students Afraid to Go to School” chronicles some Asian students’ decision not “to return to school...over concerns for their safety” after “dozens of Asian students...were attacked and beaten...”⁵¹ In the December 7, 2009, article from nbcphiladelphia.com entitled, “Attacked Asian Students: We Are Afraid,” Yung Ly (a possible misspelling of Duong Ly) says that Asian students are “...afraid to get attacked! Inside school! In the bathroom, around the hallway in school...”⁵² Even Philadelphia’s African-American newspaper,

The Philadelphia Tribune, printed a December 13, 2009, article, titled “Asian Students to Sue,” which narrates the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund’s decision to file a lawsuit on behalf of the Asian students against the Philadelphia School District.⁵³ Because much of the media coverage focuses on the Asian students having been victimized by the African-American students, this coverage may have omitted other narratives and actors in the December 3 incident.

There is a dearth of articles that present the violence as non-racial in nature, and even fewer present the African-American students’ perspective. Two articles from *The Philadelphia Tribune* present these viewpoints.

In Daryl Gale’s December 11, 2009, article, entitled “Teenage Bullying Transcends Ethnicity,” Gale claims: “Bullies, by nature, pick on those weaker than them...Because of their reluctance to hit back, because of the language barriers and because they were afraid to go to the school authorities, Asian students were targeted. They were victimized not so much because of race, but because of their seeming vulnerability.”⁵⁴ Gale’s analysis of the bullying presents a thought-provoking perspective that is different from the abundant media coverage and interviews with Asian students stating that they were bullied solely because of their race. Although interesting, his analysis of the violence as simple bullying does not explain the epithets, such as “Hey, Chinese,” or “Yo, Dragon Ball,” that the Asian students frequently endured.⁵⁵

Larry Miller’s June 4, 2010, *Philadelphia Tribune* article is the sole article in which African-American students were interviewed about the December 2009 violence. The article begins by assessing the irony of the dearth of African-American students’ perspectives represented in other media outlets, considering that black students composed approximately 70% of the high school’s population in 2009.⁵⁶ The students whom Miller interviewed took Daryl Gale’s opinion a step further, claiming that the violence was not even ordinary bullying between teenagers. Evan Riddick, currently a sophomore at Pennsylvania State University and then vice president of the South Philadelphia High School senior class, expressed this sentiment, stating: “...what went on in

December wasn't like that [bullying]. Mostly they were misunderstandings...I've been here for four years and it's rare that I see someone picking on someone else."⁵⁷ Riddick, an eyewitness to the attack, distinguishes between bullying and misunderstandings, with bullying positioned as more sinister and intentional than misunderstandings. Riddick's analysis accounts for cultural misunderstandings and the racial epithets that were directed towards the Asian students, but does not fully explain South Philadelphia High's toxic racial climate that contributed to the assaults. Riddick also addressed the December 3 lunchroom attacks, stating that there was a "...really small group of Black kids and Asian kids that were fighting."⁵⁸ Another African-American student, Darrell Jones, agreed with Riddick's assessment of the incident, stating, "It really wasn't as if Black kids were going out of their way just to beat up Asian kids. The kids I know don't have any problem with the Asian kids and they don't have a problem with us."⁵⁹ It is plausible that Jones's and Riddick's responses were informed by their perception that the majority of media coverage enforced negative racial stereotypes of African-Americans as aggressors and Asians as victims of crime. It is also possible that these two students remembered the details of the violence differently than some Asian students because their friends might not have been attacked, and also because African-American students composed the majority of the population in the 2009-2010 academic year, and therefore constituted a clear majority of the school's demographics. These facts may have caused Jones and Riddick to downplay the frequency and effect of the violence on the Asian students.

The interview that I conducted with Evan Riddick reveals another compelling outlook on the violence against the Asian students. Riddick entered the lunchroom at the time of the attacks, and helped separate the fighting students. He confirms most media outlets' assertion that approximately thirty Asian students were assaulted. He also added an interesting element to complicate the media's coverage of the number of students who may have truly been involved with the assault, stating that students could get in trouble for "just watching the fight."⁶⁰ Subsequently, disciplinary action may have been taken against not only the four African-American students and seven Asian students that

Riddick alleges were fighting, but also the spectators. His assertion corresponds with the December *Action News* coverage that reported that six Asian and four African-American students were suspended.⁶¹

Riddick added another interesting dimension to most depictions of the fighting that might align with the report of the December 2 violence against the disabled African-American student, by describing the December 3 violence as “a back and forth-situation, and African-American students fighting Asian students, and Asian students fighting back.” Riddick later conceded that, at one point, “the African-American students did go too far.” He also offered an explanation for the media’s fascination with this particular incident at South Philadelphia High School: “The incident was like any other school. Any school has its fights. I guess the media needed a story, so they decided to pick on my high school.”⁶²

South Philadelphia High School teachers Natalie Wossene and Dean Coder provide a context for the 2009 violence, based on the school’s daily climate, which was absent from the interview with Evan Riddick. Neither teacher personally witnessed the violence against the Asian students; Wossene was in her classroom all day and Coder was away from school, receiving treatment for an injury that he had sustained at the hands of a student.⁶³ The tension between the students, Wossene and Coder believe, can be attributed to a lack of understanding of different cultures. According to Coder, the violence occurs:

...anytime that you take different races and put them in close proximity, there’s going to be an adjustment. They’re not used to mannerisms, language, culture...The other reason is ignorance. When you’re not exposed to something, you don’t know. I think that whatever the majority, there’s going to be bullying—whatever the race is. . .⁶⁴

According to Wossene, this tension most likely occurs because the ESOL students are segregated from the rest of the student population during their freshman year. They are enrolled in classes that will allow them to acquire English-speaking skills. When these students have to interact with the general student population, then cultural misunderstandings occur, and these misunderstandings

create tension between students. Coder chronicles the violence from the time that students arrive to the time they graduate: "...It's an open hostility as ninth graders, and a tolerance level by the time they get to be seniors." Coder's observation explains Riddick's sentiment that as he "moved up [from grade to grade], it [his experience] wasn't that bad." The violence most likely occurs between younger students than juniors and seniors who have adjusted to students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. There may be more deep-rooted reasons for the hostility between the African-American and Asian students than simple cultural misunderstanding that exploded in the lunchroom and after-school attacks. Changes to South Philadelphia's ethnic composition over time, combined with students' perceptions of their own and other ethnic groups in an educational setting, fueled the December 3 attacks.

Potential Catalysts for the Violence at South Philadelphia High School

South Philadelphia's ethnic composition has undergone several transformations over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries; these changes to the neighborhood's composition may have contributed to the instances of violence that are evident throughout Philadelphia's history. According to the report on immigration published by the Brookings Institute titled *Recent Immigration to Philadelphia: Regional Change in a Re-Emerging Gateway*, South Philadelphia was composed primarily of Russians Jews, Slovaks, Greeks, and Italians in the 1880s and 1890s.⁶⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, the neighborhood became most closely associated with Italian immigrants, as a result of changes in the nation's immigration patterns. These Italian immigrants heavily influenced the naming of the grocery shops, stores, and cafés along South Philadelphia's Ninth Street between Christian Street and Washington Avenue, so much so that this area is now called the Italian Market. Simultaneously, South Philadelphia, particularly the area surrounding South Philadelphia High School (Juniper Street to the east, Passyunk Avenue to the north, S. Bancroft Street to the west, and Snyder Avenue to the south), showed a growing African-American population, at 12,652 residents,

or 13.4% of the total area's population.⁶⁶

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees immigrated to South Philadelphia, and transformed many of the neighborhood's buildings, restaurants, and shops, so that today, Washington Avenue has many pho soup and barbecue restaurants, Buddhist apothecaries, and supermarkets that reflect growing South Philadelphia's Asian population.⁶⁷ According to the 2000 American Community Survey, the area near South Philadelphia High School was 47.1 % white, 39 % black, and 10.7 % Asian.⁶⁸ Based on more recent estimates provided by the American Community Survey for 2005-2009, the area near the high school is 52.9% white, 28.7% black, 15% Asian, and 6% Latino.⁶⁹

The changes in Philadelphia's ethnic composition over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries were accompanied by interethnic violence. Violence between firefighters of disparate religions and ethnicities plagued nineteenth-century South Philadelphia, following the influx in immigration primarily from Ireland, Italy, England, and Germany.⁷⁰ Many of these newcomers struggled to adjust to Philadelphia, and fought with native-born Philadelphians or with immigrants of different ethnicities or religions. In the 1960s, the violence between blacks and whites at Bok Vocational High School may have been sparked by some whites' inability to cope with the changes in the racial composition of "their neighborhood" and their "neighborhood schools" as a result of the Great Migration. These white Philadelphians felt that blacks' presence in Philadelphia threatened their perceived right to attend these schools. Subsequently, African-American students faced violence and harassment from neighborhood residents.

The violence at South Philadelphia High School appears to be the next chapter in South Philadelphia's legacy of conflict due to the changes wrought on its ethnic composition. As previously mentioned, South Philadelphia underwent significant changes to its population in the 1970s and 1980s, with an influx of Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants, and an overall increase in the neighborhood's Asian population to 15%. As we saw through the example of Bok Vocational

High School, high schools are not insulated from the changes that take place in their neighborhoods, and therefore it is possible that some of the students are reacting to these changes in their neighborhoods over time. In an interview that I conducted with Wei Chen, a recent graduate of the high school and former president of the school's Chinese Student Association, Chen attributed violence to "students...[not] know[ing] each other's cultures."⁷¹ Apparently, even the students are aware that ignorance of different cultures creates conflict and may have been one of the catalysts for the December 2009 violence at their school.

The school's environment leading up to December 2009 may have bred the cultural misunderstandings that served as a potential cause of the violence. Natalie Wossene describes the separation of students into ESOL classes as freshmen:

As freshmen, it's more segregated. ESOL classes are more segregated, with kids who just came—Mexicans, Hispanics, Africans. Students take ESOL as freshmen. When you have Algebra, you have Algebra ESOL. The majority of these students are just learning English.⁷²

While it is necessary to have separate courses for foreign-born students to learn English, separating these students from the general student population for all of their courses impedes their interaction with students who are not enrolled in ESOL courses. Based on the statistics provided by current principal Otis Hackney, ESOL students currently comprise 20% of the student body.⁷³ Separating one-fifth of the school's student body from non-ESOL students could provide an abundance of opportunities for mistrust, miscommunication, and misunderstanding, because the students have few occasions in which to interact and learn about each other's cultures. The separation of these students from the general student body may have contributed to the December 2009 violence. According to the previously mentioned Giles Report: "The in-school assailants were in the 9th grade, although some were in the 10th grade."⁷⁴ Teachers' testimonies combined with this report confirm that preventing the ESOL students from having abundant opportunities to socialize with non-ESOL students, especially when they are in the ninth and tenth grades, contributed to the

misunderstandings that escalated into violence. Although this separation of students appears to be a primary factor in the 2009 fray, it is by no means the only factor.

The violence that took place at South Philadelphia High School in late 2009 was the explosive climax in a series of attacks against Asian students that had gone unaddressed over the course of several years. In a September 1, 2009, *Philadelphia Weekly* article entitled, “Asian Students Under Assault: Seeking Refuge from School Violence,” George Miller wrote about patterns of Asian students being harassed and beaten at South Philadelphia High School and other Philadelphia schools. In the article, Miller interviewed Wei Chen, who spoke about the varying levels of harassment that Asian students faced on an almost daily basis.⁷⁵ According to Chen, these instances ranged from minor—name-calling, robberies, punches in the head while walking down stairwells, and general intimidation—to Asian students being assaulted by large groups of teenagers, and many victims of these assaults being sent to hospitals.⁷⁶ There were also six instances during the 2008-2009 school year that escalated into massive fights. According to the article, in October 2008, approximately thirty teenagers attacked five Chinese students in the Snyder Avenue subway station. The December 2009 attack is therefore not the first time that Asian South Philadelphia High School students were assaulted.

Given the history of violence against Asian students at South Philadelphia High School, why did this violence persist? As Chen surmised, Asian cultural norms could have prevented many of the victims of assault from reporting their attacks so that the necessary disciplinary action could have been taken: “In Chinese culture, you can’t tell about problems,” he explains. “If you tell about problems, you are a bad student. You’re not allowed to question authority.”⁷⁷ These cultural practices may have contributed to violence that took place at the high school prior to December 2009. Current principal Otis Hackney was the Assistant Principal of South Philadelphia High School four years ago before he left the School District to work at a suburban district for three years.⁷⁸ During Hackney’s tenure as Assistant Principal, he recalls seeing “a student get punched in the face

for no reason.” Principal Hackney attributes his and other officials’ inability to fully and properly respond to such violence to “difficulty in developing the trust where students will report what happened to them.” In other words, if students are unable or unwilling to tell teachers or administrators that they were attacked, it is difficult for them to assess these situations. Another reason that it may have been difficult to help the students could be attributed to administrators and school officials “not having the resources to communicate.”⁷⁹ Hackney states that he “knew that the tension was there” and that his “role was to look at this institution and to remove the sources of this tension.” These resources to which Principal Hackney referred were translators for the approximately eighteen languages that are currently spoken in the high school.⁸⁰ That number continues to increase as the neighborhood of South Philadelphia and the students who attend the high school become more diverse. Unfortunately, the School District has been unable to measure the high school’s true diversity, as the School District is only able to count the number of students of different races, not ethnicities, because the racial data on the students remain aggregated. The aggregation of data into racial categories instead of ethnic categories leaves the high school without the proper resources to communicate with all the students.⁸¹ Without the resources to communicate with some Asian students who may have been ESOL students, administrators, and even the School District, may be unable to perform a full investigation of the violence. Consequently, it may also become increasingly difficult to state whether or not a student was randomly attacked or if there are other reasons for his or her attack.

The prevalence of violence in South Philadelphia and Philadelphia as a whole could have contributed to the December 2009 violence. According to the Philadelphia Police Department website, there were seventy homicides in 2008 and sixty-seven homicides in 2009.⁸² Between November 10, 2009, and December 10, 2009, there were thirty-six cases of aggravated assault in South Philadelphia without guns in the immediate area surrounding South Philadelphia High School,⁸³ three instances of homicide,⁸⁴ and fifty-one instances of robberies.⁸⁵ In addition to these

statistics, Duong Ly provides personal testimony of two in-school attacks in the high school on his brother during the 2008-2009 academic year, two attacks on his father in the neighborhood, and an attack by a group of middle-schoolers on himself outside his home.⁸⁶ Based on these statistics and Duong's account of this violence, it is fair to categorize South Philadelphia as a high-crime neighborhood. These crime rates, as well as the fear of violent crime at any moment, contribute to what Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson calls "...an edge to public life."⁸⁷ This "edge to public life" then must necessitate "a careful way of moving, of acting, of getting up and down the streets."⁸⁸ These controlled, regulated social interactions out of fear of violence may have permeated the walls of South Philadelphia High School. A key example of these careful but potentially volatile social interactions may have taken place on December 2 when a Vietnamese student allegedly bumped an African-American student, and did not apologize.⁸⁹ The African-American student may have taken the Vietnamese student's lack of apology as a sign of disrespect; the Vietnamese student lacked the ability to read the neighborhood's social cues, and consequently the school's social cues. Interactions such as this, as well as the fights that took place over the course of several years, could have very well produced an environment conducive to the violence in December 2009.

Changes at South Philadelphia High School

In the aftermath of the violence at South Philadelphia High School, several changes have been made to the school's structure and learning environment. After the December 2009 violence and boycott, several lawsuits were filed on behalf of the Asian students against the School District. These lawsuits culminated with the U.S. Justice Department's July 2010 ruling that the School District had deprived the Asian students of equal protection by "remaining deliberately indifferent to known instances of severe and pervasive student-on-student harassment of Asian students based on their race, color, and/or national origin."⁹⁰ A court order issued since the attacks called for the Justice Department and the Human Relations Commission to monitor the school's progress,⁹¹ to

which the School District agreed on December 15, 2010. The Justice Department and the Pennsylvania Reform Commission provided the Philadelphia School District with strict guidelines for the way that racial harassment should be treated, translation services to be provided to students and their families, and training to be given to teachers.⁹²

The first obvious change at the high school began with the replacement of LaGreta Brown by former Assistant Principal Otis Hackney. Brown resigned as a result of the scrutiny “that the violence focused on her leadership and qualifications.”⁹³ Part of Principal Hackney’s mission has been to take the Justice Department and Pennsylvania Reform Commission’s recommendations to heart and establish “a culture of safety, punctuality, and respect” as well as create “programs that cultivate interaction between different students.”⁹⁴ Some of these programs include the Asian Arts Initiative, which will offer after-school art classes, and inviting the Philadelphia Student Union to start a chapter at the school. Additionally, the District hired Kimlime Chek-Taylor as Assistant Principal, and the Main Line Chinese Cultural Center is organizing diversity training for teachers.⁹⁵ Principal Hackney also took several steps to paint the school as a more welcoming environment for students of different backgrounds, particularly Asian students. First, he listened to the Asian students’ advocates.⁹⁶ Then, Hackney had various school documents translated into a variety of languages spoken in the school, and had his phone calls translated into several languages.⁹⁷ He even created a positive feeling when students enter the school each morning and see new signs above the school’s entrance that say “Welcome” in six languages. This is a subtle but important way of embracing the school’s diversity in order to create an accepting and comfortable learning environment.

Conclusion

The violence that took place at South Philadelphia High School in December 2009 is much more complex than the thirty-second sound bites that some media outlets report. In order to fully

understand the interethnic violence that took place between Asian and African-American students, it is important to go beyond the sensationalist media coverage that ignores this violence as part of a longer history of interethnic violence in South Philadelphia, with origins in the late nineteenth and mid twentieth-centuries. The violence between rival white ethnic and religious firehouses, and then between African-American and Italian-American students in South Philadelphia, took place as a result of changes in South Philadelphia's ethnic composition. The conflict at South Philadelphia High School in December 2009 has similar roots. Increases in the neighborhood's Asian population set the stage for the December violence, as some African-American students, like many of their neighbors, began to react to being around people who were unfamiliar to them.

To this day, official accounts of the December 3 incident and its causes vary. But South Philadelphia High School's racial environment of cultural awareness, understanding, and respect, as well as strict penalties for bullying under current Principal Otis Hackney, will hopefully prevent another large-scale incident like December 3 from happening again.

Notes

¹"Bullying Against Asian Students Roils Philadelphia High School." *USA Today*, January 22, 2010. http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-01-22-asian-bullying-philadelphia_N.htm.

²Ibid.

³I was unable to contact Debbie Wei and Helen Gym, community activists who could have provided me with additional insight into this matter. They may have wanted to spend their time and energy with someone who might have been able to effect tangible change at South Philadelphia High School.

⁴Different sources provide different names for the Bok School. In Matthew Countryman's *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

2006), Countryman refers to the Bok School as Bok Vocational High School, and I follow his example.

⁵Feldberg, Michael. "Urbanization as a Cause of Violence: Philadelphia as a Test Case." In *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* edited by Allen Freeman Davis and Mark H. Haller, 57. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973.

⁶Ibid., 57.

⁷Warner, Sam Bass, Jr. *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, 54.

⁸Ibid., 61.

⁹Laurie, Bruce. "Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840s." In *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* edited by Allen Freeman Davis and Mark H. Haller, 79. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973.

¹⁰Ibid., 75.

¹¹"Local Affairs," *Public Ledger*, June 27, 1844.

¹²"Local Affairs," *Public Ledger*, November 14, 1843.

¹³Feldberg, 54.

¹⁴Countryman, 238.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶"Charge Bok Technical Principal Trying to Hold Colored Kids Back; Rejected Scholarships, Taken No College Preparatory Steps." *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 31, 1966.

¹⁷"Bok's Valedictorian Not Selected for College." *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 14, 1966.

¹⁸"Charge Bok Technical Principal."

¹⁹Countryman, 248.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Coder, Dean and Wossene, Natalie. Interview by Nichole Nelson. February 15, 2011.

²⁴Hackney, Otis. Interview by Nichole Nelson. January 10, 2011.

²⁵Thompson, Isaiah. "The Fall Guy." *Philadelphia City Paper*, March 17, 2010.

<http://archives.citypaper.net/articles/2010/03/18/south-philadelphia-high-school-racial-violence>.

²⁶Gammage, Jeff and Graham, Kristen A. "Report Released on Racial Violence at S. Phila. High."

Philadelphia Inquirer, February 24, 2010. Reprinted on Asian American Legal Defense and

Education Fund website. <http://aaldef.org/news/news-story/report-released-on-racial-violence-at-s-phila-high---philadelphia-inquirer.html>

²⁷Giles, James T. *Report to the School District of Philadelphia of an Independent Investigation into Possible Racial/Ethnic Conflicts at South Philadelphia High School on December 2-3, 2009: Report and Recommendations*, v.

²⁸Giles, 2-3.

²⁹Ibid..

³⁰Ibid., 3.

³¹Ibid., 4.

³²Ibid., 6.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 8.

³⁶Ibid., 10.

³⁷Ibid., 11. It is possible that some Asian students were confused about who the principal was in relation to the other adults on the floor.

³⁸Giles, 12.

³⁹Ibid., 14.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 15.

⁴²According to Giles (p. 23), no one knows what made the students move faster.

⁴³Giles, 23.

⁴⁴Ibid., 2.

⁴⁵Ly, Duong. Interview by Nichole Nelson. February 27, 2011.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷“Bullying Against Asian students.”

⁴⁸Lattanzio, Vince. “District Investigates Racial Attacks at South Philly High.” *NBC Philadelphia*, December 10, 2009. <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local-beat/School-District-Investigates-Racial-Attacks-at-Southern-High-78930037.html>.

⁴⁹Ly, Duong. Interview by Nichole Nelson. February 27, 2011.

⁵⁰“Asian Students Return to South Philly High.”

<http://abclocal.go.com/wpvi/story?section=news/local&id=7172013>. ABC Action News clip, December 15, 2009.

⁵¹Johnson, Danielle. “Attacked Asian Students Afraid to Go to School.” *NBC Philadelphia*, December 7, 2009. <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Attacked-Asian-Students-Fear-Returning-to-Class-78652997.html>.

⁵²Johnson, Danielle. “Attacked Asian Students: We Are Afraid.” *NBC Philadelphia*, December 7, 2009. <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Attacked-Asian-Students-We-Are-Afraid-78714142.html>.

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⁵⁴Gale, Darryl. “Teenage Bullying Transcends Ethnicity.” *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 11, 2009.

⁵⁵“Bullying Against Asian Students.”

⁵⁶Miller, Larry. "In Defense of South Phila. High." *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 4, 2010.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Riddick, Evan. Interview by Nichole Nelson. December 10, 2010.

⁶¹"Asian Students Return to South Philly High."

⁶²Riddick, Evan. Interview by Nichole Nelson. December 10, 2010.

⁶³Coder, Dean and Wossene, Natalie. Interview by Nichole Nelson. February 15, 2011.

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⁶⁸Social Explorer. "2000 American Community Survey Data Acquired through Social Explorer Data for Total Census Tracts 30, 31, 37.01, 37.02, 38, 39.01, and 40.01." <http://www.socialexplorer.com>.

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⁷⁰Social Explorer. "Place of Birth for South for Philadelphians from 1880 Census for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." <http://www.socialexplorer.com>.

⁷¹Chen, Wei. Interview by Nichole Nelson. March 16, 2011.

⁷²Coder, Dean and Wossene, Natalie. Interview by Nichole Nelson. February 15, 2011.

⁷³Hackney, Otis. Interview by Nichole Nelson. January 10, 2011.

⁷⁴Giles, v.

⁷⁵Miller, G. W. III. "Asian Students Under Assault Seeking Refuge from School Violence."

Philadelphia Weekly, September 1, 2009. [http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-](http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/cover-story/Asian-Students-Under-Assault.html?page=1&comments=1&showAll=#ixzz1IJSbSxKx)

[opinion/cover-story/Asian-Students-Under-](http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/cover-story/Asian-Students-Under-Assault.html?page=1&comments=1&showAll=#ixzz1IJSbSxKx)

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⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Hackney, Otis. Interview by Nichole Nelson. January 10, 2011.

⁷⁹Ibid.

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⁸³Philadelphia Police Department Crime Map for aggravated assaults in Philadelphia between

November 10, 2009 and December 10, 2009.

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[to=12%2f10%2f2009.](http://citymaps.phila.gov/CrimeMap/map.aspx?address=&crimetype=42&from=11%2f10%2f2009&to=12%2f10%2f2009)

⁸⁴Philadelphia Police Department Crime Map for homicides in Philadelphia between November 10,

2009 and December 10, 2009.

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⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Hackney, Otis. Interview by Nichole Nelson. January 10, 2011.

⁹⁷Ibid.