

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Richard Fletcher, I am a British-born US citizen, Ohio voter, associate professor at The Ohio State University in the Department of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy, and the proud parent of a child who attends the Columbus City Schools World Language Middle School, who I hope one day will attend one of Ohio's prestigious public institutions of higher education. I am here today to offer my testimony in strong opposition to Sub. Senate Bill 83, and its partner bill, Sub. House Bill 151.

I submitted opposition testimony to the original version of the Bill, in which I focused on the mandated 3-credit American government or history course, remaining present in both the Sub. Senate Bill and Sub. House Bill. This aspect of the Bill not only undermines the role of faculty governance for enacting rigorous curricular development, approval, and assessment, but also, through its limited mandated core readings, is short-sighted and exclusionary of the full spectrum of the American experience that our students look to us to learn. Yet the night after I had submitted my testimony, and before joining many other faculty, staff, students, and other opponents here in the Statehouse on April 19<sup>th</sup>, I dreamt of another testimony, one that I had neither written nor submitted.

My dream testimony would have hit on the precise tone, enumerated the right points, and made the most compelling case against this unnecessary and damaging legislation that would do irreparable harm to our public institutions of higher education with zero benefits. Not only would your committee have realized it was irredeemable, not tried to amend it, but simply killed it on the spot, but the accompanying Bill in the House, would never have been introduced. In fact, the shockwaves of my testimony would have reverberated well beyond this legislative body. It would have echoed through the whole machinery that produced this and similar legislation across the nation – right back to the Koch Donor Network, via civics engineering Centers planted at universities like those proposed in Ohio Senate Bill 117, to right-wing think tanks, with their implementation and issue mobilization groups. It would bring Democrats and Republicans together to re-invest in public higher education as a necessary public good, deeming it vital for the health of our democracy and to prepare our students to be citizens for a just and diverse world, while also tackling head-on imminent climate crisis and enacting long-overdue reparations to Black and Indigenous communities.

Of course, this was just a dream. And today I stand before you in the harsh light of reality; a reality in which not only is there no such testimony, but the myriad testimonies of faculty, staff, students, and other opponents of this legislation already spoken and submitted have been unheeded. Nonetheless, as I was reflecting on this dream testimony while sitting down to write the present testimony, I realized that it contained an important truth, one that it shared with, and maybe even emerged from, the testimony I submitted earlier against the original Bill.

In that testimony, I ended by turning to my research and teaching in arts education by citing the example of Anna Tsouhlarakis, an artist of Navajo, Creek, and Greek heritage, whose *The Native Guide Project: Columbus* is currently on show at the Wexner Center for the Arts, both inside and outside the building, as well as in various locations in downtown Columbus. Using spare black text on a white background, Tsouhlarakis's work shares an inclusive and generous vision for Indigenous presence within a settler colonial institution like The Ohio State University and this city named after Columbus, with phrases, mixing positive reinforcement with a certain snarky humor, such as:

IT'S TRUE, THERE WAS A VOICE BEFORE COLUMBUS

Or:

YOU'RE RIGHT, NATIVE AMERICANS HAVE DREAMS TOO

I wrote how this Bill, with its regressive restrictions and demands on our curriculum that denies the whole story of our past, will deprive our students of being part of a future we can ALL dream of. Yet it wasn't so much the powerful works of art by Anna Tsouhlarakis that spoke to me and informed my dream testimony, more the way her work was responsive to where it was made for and where it is currently installed: this land known as Ohio. It is on behalf of this land that I want to speak to you today. But how am I meant to speak for this land? And who am I to speak for this land? As you can hear from my accent, and as I experience on a day-to-day basis with questions like 'where are you from?', I am not Indigenous to this land; I am neither an Ohio Native, nor a Native American. I am a Settler, like many of us gathered here today. You don't need me to tell you that, if you trace your family lines back, you will find someone like me who arrived here from somewhere else, who came either willingly or by force. But the reason I believe that I can stand here speaking, if not for, at least *with* the land known as Ohio, is that this legislation, by its very nature, does direct violence to where we are and what it stands for. And this is because its proposed 'enhancement' to higher education in Ohio has not emerged from Ohio, but is being imposed by a coordinated, well-funded effort that completely ignores what we in Ohio are and need in our education. In short, this legislation is not made for, nor listening to, where we are.

To return to Tsouhlarakis, one of her works reads:

I REALLY LIKE HOW YOU LISTEN WHEN THE MOUNDS SPEAK

Not only is this work attentive to the presence of ancient earthworks across the Ohio Valley, but also to their living presence in our cultural landscape – grounding ways of learning that center Indigenous knowledge, presence, and life, in spite of settler colonial histories of genocide, removal, and erasure of sovereign tribal nations, such as the Shawnee, Seneca, Ottawa, Wyandot, among others. At The Ohio State University, as chair of the College of Arts & Sciences Curriculum Committee panel focused on approving courses for the Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Diversity Foundational courses in our General Education requirements, I have requested – only as a recommendation, so

not required – that Land Acknowledgments to be included in course syllabi. I have had robust dialogue with colleagues and students alike about how such statements can be performative gestures, especially when used by institutions. And no doubt this might epitomize the ‘wokeness’ that this Bill and other legislation is determined to stamp out. However, what I say to my colleagues and students, and which I will echo here in this context, is that it is only performative if it is not accompanied by supporting lessons within the course itself. If a Land Acknowledgment, is left to the text of a syllabus and not threaded through the curriculum, grounding it, then its presence reinscribes the erasure of Indigenous voices in our educational institutions. And, as Nishnaabeg artist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has taught me in a chapter of her book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* called ‘Land as Pedagogy’, the land is both the context for and intrinsic to the process for learning.

But this legislation is not listening. Neither to those of us who reside within institutions of higher education, nor to the very grounds of our learning. You don’t need me to tell you that Ohio is a truly special place. It is an historical and contemporary site of gathering and exchange of ideas. Yet this legislation would forcibly remove this quality from us. The land known as Ohio doesn’t need legislation generated by well-funded think tanks or planted Centers or Institutes imposed on its innovative institutions. It needs us to listen, responsibly and carefully, to each other, here and now.

So, instead of standing here defending mandatory Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, I am here to listen to what these initiatives are there to foster in our campuses and for our students. Instead of standing here resisting harmful restrictions on unionizing efforts, I am here to listen to how people who work together join with each other to change their working conditions for the better. Instead of standing here pushing back against a limited 3-credit American history or government course that undermines faculty governance and its basis in curriculum, I am here to listen to all of the varied ways our shared history informs and enriches our present lives and shared futures.

Like the land known as Ohio, we who speak united in opposition, are not going anywhere unless silenced or destroyed by coordinated acts of exclusionary violence. You can pass your Bill, but we remain united against what it will impose. You can pass your Bill, but our classrooms will continue to be spaces of rigorous, brave, and responsible learning. You can pass your Bill, but we will continue to make our campuses spaces open and welcome to all who show up. You can pass your Bill, but it will be our shared future that will grow from the seeds of opposition we sow here today, in our showing up together, in our kinship as teacher, our love for our students, while you indulge the last gasps of dying, colonial worldview, grounded in narcissism, extraction, violence, and hate.

But, it is not too late. You don’t have to pass your Bill, you can let it die, and you can join us, and we can work together to make the context and process for learning worthy of this bountiful and generous land known as Ohio.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on Sub. Ohio Senate Bill 83. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to take any questions you may have.