

June 19, 2020

To our students and alumni,

On May 25th, the world witnessed the horrifying spectacle of Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, killing George Floyd. Floyd's murder, the latest in an ever-growing list of African Americans senselessly killed by police, has forced the country to confront structural racism. This is a moment of national reckoning. It is a time of introspection for us in the English Department as well.

Literature is about the world and of the world. It understands, explains, justifies, and criticizes the world through language. It can be complicit in power structures, or it can challenge them. As the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie eloquently puts it, "Stories can be used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize" ("The Danger of a Single Story"). Literature has long played a role in disseminating racism; it has also been a channel of antiracist resistance.

Today, in light of the murder of George Floyd and the nation-wide protests against police brutality, we reiterate our commitment to the anti-racist potential of literature in our teaching, scholarship, creative writing, mentorship, and service. We believe Black Lives Matter. Black Voices Matter.

The field of English studies has perpetuated white supremacy in a variety of ways—through celebrating a canon of white literary "classics," through requiring a curriculum that prioritizes white British and American authors, through maintaining a predominantly white faculty. While some work has been done in liberating the canon from its white supremacist bias, the inclusion of Black voices in higher education, beyond tokenism, has, sadly, lagged behind. It is our job to change that.

Over the past two years, we have revised our curriculum to decenter whiteness and bring a more diverse set of voices to the forefront of a North Central education. The traditional model aims to cover centuries-long history of British and American writing and marginalizes writers of color. Our new curriculum is built around a set of themes that highlight the connections of literature and rhetoric to identity, to social, political and economic contexts, and to the world. Creative writing added an ethical dimension to the study of craft and genre by incorporating courses in literature and rhetoric into the curriculum. Intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class are woven into almost all courses. We have been grateful for your engagement in these difficult discussions.

While this is a start, antiracist work is a life-long process, and there is more to be done. As we plan our next steps, we would love to hear from you, our students. In regard to race, diversity, and equity, what do you want to learn? What kinds of courses are most meaningful to you, and what are we missing? How can we make our classroom communities and departmental culture more inclusive? If you are able, please share your thoughts in this anonymous survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KZS2F8J>

From,

Professor Judith Brodhead
Professor Mary Clinkenbeard
Professor Jennifer Jackson
Professor Lisa Long

Professor Megan Cole Paustian
Professor Sohinee Roy
Professor Jennifer Smith
Professor Rebecca Stafford