

English Department Follow-up Statement on the Black Lives Matter Movement

Approved by the English Department on April 20, 2022

In October 2020, the Fordham University English Department unanimously adopted a statement affirming and supporting the global outcry against anti-Blackness and racism in all its forms. There we acknowledged that any move toward reparation must begin by answering the call for accountability at the present time—from our students and alumni, from the scholarly community, and from the nation and world at large. We sought to acknowledge the ways that our teaching, our research, and our knowledge-making activities at Fordham, as at all universities, are deeply embedded in structures that marginalize, silence, and harm Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. We announced that we had begun examining the structures of white supremacy as they relate to our work as educators and scholars, and that our aim over the next twelve months would be to look closely at our departmental requirements, our curricula, and the profiles of our students and instructors.

Despite the delays brought on by exacerbated pandemic workloads and fatigue, we kept up the work that would make good on our promise to our students, alumni, and community. Slightly later than planned, the present statement offers a progress report on the English Department's efforts over the past year to reckon with its imbrication in systemic racism, to take on the work of anti-racism, and to maintain hopes for the future.

Since our original statement on the Black Lives Matter movement, we have taken several steps to follow through on our pledge “to make lasting and meaningful changes” to our department.

- We have submitted a request for a cohort hire that, if successful, will bring new tenure-track faculty in three fields: African literatures; African American literatures; and early Medieval literature, race, and culture. All these hires would strengthen the department's area group on race, empire, and colonialism.
- We have collected hard data on the racial and ethnic profile of the Fordham English major for the past ten years, and we have begun the process of investigating how we can attract, support, and retain a more racially and ethnically diverse group of students.
- We have created an online space where English faculty and graduate students can share and discuss anti-racist teaching resources, including sample syllabi, statements of care and inclusion, assignments, lesson plans, and research on best classroom practices.
- We have re-designed the Poets Out Loud Series as [The Poetic Justice Institute](#), “a community of poets, scholars, students, and social justice workers who explore the power of poetry to change the world for the better through acts of imagination and the energy of

new language and visions.” Directed by Professors Elisabeth Frost and Sarah Gambito, the institute awards book prizes, hosts a podcast, and runs a speaker series that has featured Tamiko Beyer, MARS, José Olivarez, Jake Skeets, Craig Santos Perez, Tawana Petty, Ching-in Chen, José Alvergue, Roger Reeves, and many others. On April 2, 2022, it hosted a free, daylong literary festival for BIPOC students and allies centering BIPOC experiences and perspectives.

- We have continued to organize [The Reid Family Writers of Color Reading Series](#), an annual event celebrating a contemporary writer of color, featuring a lecture, master classes, and a student writing prize. The Reid writer for 2022 is Renee Gladman, author of *Calamities*. Free copies and a pedagogy workshop were offered to faculty interested in teaching the book.
- We awarded the [2021 Mary Higgins Clark Chair](#) to Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel about the Black Lives Matter movement. Free copies were distributed to interested faculty and students; and a pedagogy workshop was offered for faculty teaching the book. Angie Thomas gave her keynote address on October 7, 2021.
- We have sponsored a set of [student-run teaching awards](#) recognizing outstanding teaching that combats racism and promotes social justice. Now in its second year, the awards honor outstanding teachers in Composition, Texts and Contexts, and upper-division English electives.
- We have begun research into the history of the Fordham English Department and the history of the University, to recognize how the longstanding entanglements of racism and the teaching of English have taken root at our institution specifically. In conjunction with this project, we are investigating the possibility of conducting oral histories with former English faculty of color so that we can do justice to their experiences. A small group of faculty has received training in oral history for this purpose. If we succeed in reaching our prospective narrators, we will remunerate them for their time and labor.
- Two English faculty members, Professors James Kim and Stephen Sohn, are directing a working group with faculty from across the university to build an Asian American Studies program. In fall 2021, Professor Sohn applied for and won two substantial grants from the university: a Deans’ Challenge Grant and a Teaching Race across the Curriculum Grant. These monies are helping members of the working group gain rigorous training in the field and design new Asian American Studies courses. Professors Kim and Sohn hope to submit a proposal for an Asian American Studies minor in fall 2022.

- A number of our faculty members have begun experimenting with labor-based grading, specifications grading, and other non-traditional, anti-racist modes of academic evaluation.
- Since spring 2021, we have offered 36 sections of courses with the Race and Social Justice attribute, including:
 - ENGL 3647 - Seeing Stories: Reading Race and Graphic Narratives
 - ENGL 4108 - Exhibiting Latinidad: Curation/Display/Intervention
 - ENGL 4603 - Asian American Critique
 - ENGL 3109 - Writing Pleasure in the Age of Beyoncé
 - ENGL 3037 - US Latinx Literature
 - ENGL 4605 - Antiracist Methods
 - ENGL 3359 - Asian Diasporic Literatures
 - ENGL 3664 - Queer Latinx Literature
 - ENGL 3838 - Postcolonial Literature and Film
 - ENGL 3015 - To Bear Witness: Poetry and Social Justice
 - ENGL 3357 - Writing Asian America
 - ENGL 4210 - Comparative Studies in Atlantic Revolutions
 - ENGL 4020 - Adrienne Kennedy: Text and Performance
 - ENGL 4044 - Incarceration: History, Literature, Film
 - ENGL 3123 - Surviving the Barbarians in Early Medieval Britain
 - ENGL 3614 - Slavery and American Fiction
 - ENGL 3645 - The Middle Passage
 - ENGL 4007 - *Othello*
 - ENGL 4185 - Caribbean Islands and Oceans
 - ENGL 4606 - James Baldwin

We are pleased with this work and hope that the collective effect of these multiple initiatives and changes is already felt. At the same time, we are not and cannot be done. The work of dismantling systemic racism is ongoing work, and the Fordham English Department is resolved to continue that work as we help to build a more just university. In the next year, as we continue our existing initiatives, we hope also to prioritize:

- researching our department and University, including but not limited to the history of tenuring and promoting faculty of color, and the longer and more complex ties between North American Jesuits and the Indigenous peoples on whose lands the Jesuits established their colleges; depending on our findings, we may communicate with other departments to recommend a University-wide investigation such as have been conducted by [Brown](#), [Georgetown](#), and the [University of Virginia](#);

- determining how best to make a concerted effort to attract, support, and teach students from across the full demographic spectrum of Fordham's colleges;
- centering inclusion as well as diversity, to create not only a broader representation of the authors and artists who work and have worked in the English language, but also a fuller experience for all students who come to study here.