

**October 15, 2020**

***From: Department of African American Studies, Northwestern University***

**Re: Anti-Racism and Reconstruction in a Predominantly White University**

These continue to be troubling and unsettling times. It is time for us to speak plainly. Black life in the US has always been marked by its violent encounter with structures of white supremacy, currently deeply integrated into the social institutions of liberalism and democracy, capitalism and consumerism. 2020 is the year of what is now known as the twin pandemics: covid-19 and anti-Black police violence. Both in different ways, highlight a reckoning with structural racism. The impact of the covid-19 virus on the US has resulted in over 7.64 million cases and over 213,000 deaths (at the time of writing). Black people are twice as likely to contract the virus as white people and twice as likely to die from it. Against that despairing background, in May the police killing of George Floyd, a Black man in Minnesota, precipitated not only national but global mobilizations of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement against police violence, anti-Blackness and white supremacy. The New York Times has described BLM as the largest social movement in US history. It has impacted nearly every state in the Union, not the least in predominantly white states like Oregon. Throughout this time many different organizations, corporations, and institutions, including universities like ours, have responded to this historical inflection point with various commitments to tackling questions of diversity, racism, equality, and white supremacy. Nevertheless, we are concerned to ensure that such a moment for institutional and social change is not lost at Northwestern as it has been so many times in the past.

### **The Trayvon Generation**

Many of our students at Northwestern belong to what the poet Elizabeth Alexander has described as the 'Trayvon Generation'. They grew up learning the iconic names of deceased Black people

symbolized in previous protests dating from the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. These names now read like a roll call of Black grief and Black grievances following the killings of Aiyana Stanley-Jones (2010), Alton Sterling (2016), Michael Brown (2014), Eric Garner (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Laquan McDonald (2014), Sandra Bland (2015), Walter Scott (2015), Philando Castile (2016). As an African American Studies Department, it is important that we not only express our support for the protests but explain their meaning to the wider public. We also need to demonstrate how we are understanding and responding to the uncertain and yet profound implications of the enduring impact of Covid-19 on Black and Brown populations, particularly those who work in frontline emergency assistance positions. As a movement BLM now symbolizes across the 50 states of the US, condemnations against the longevity of structural racism, unrelenting police violence toward Black people, and the decades lineage of the murders of Black men and Black women (both cisgender and transgender) at the hands of white police officers and white civilians. As we know George Floyd's racist death was not alone this year, it was preceded and followed by other similar police killings and one serious paralysis through wounding, namely: Ahmaud Arbery (February), Breonna Taylor (March), Daniel Prude (March), Tony McDade (May), Riah Milton (June), Dominique Fells (June), Rayshard Brooks (June), and Jacob Blake (August; who was paralyzed). While we mourn these atrocities and express deep sorrow for the Black families who are grieving, we also understand these kinds of violent deaths underwrite a long uninterrupted history of anti-Blackness, that is often unnamed and ignored by our institutions and yet continues to be known and felt by those of us who live as well as study Black history.

### **Shifting the Northwestern Paradigm**

Northwestern has always been earnest in its attempts to signal its commitments to representative diversity, without always making good on those commitments, and has at the same time generally recoiled from naming and addressing structural racial inequalities and racial injustices. The urgent need to move away from that paradigm cannot be overstated. As a nation, the US is currently facing a racially existential choice: to confront and deal with structural racism or once again to deny its existence and disavow its continuing persistence. This is compounded by the Federal Government's incoherent and negligent responses to the Covid-19 pandemic which has left millions unemployed and uninsured, facing systemic economic barriers to healthcare, with

Black and Brown people disproportionately affected. We are living through the most significant confluence of social movements and social upheavals against racism both in the US and across the planet, since the early 1960s when the world was defined by a myriad of political movements against the white supremacies of Jim Crow, Apartheid and European Colonialisms. The return of these unresolved issues to world-wide attention, raises the question of whether our university intends to be at the forefront of an intellectual and political paradigm shift where these questions of structural racism are at last on the public policy agenda without being drenched in euphemism. For us this means the now redundant languages of managerial and corporate diversity, that routinely translate structural questions of racism into individual issues of unconscious bias, and foreclose any mention of racism or white supremacy, should no longer be used to distract or mislead us. Predominantly white universities like ours need to take a lead in being open to thinking about and responding to the required kinds of social change and racial justice that have continually been avoided and repressed since the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s. African American studies departments in predominantly white universities, like Black people symbolically in the nation, cannot easily avoid being the moral and political conscience that urges the wider community to approach an anti-racist future without repeating the mistakes and the derelictions of the racist past. Our university leadership can no longer assume that Northwestern is free from structural racism, continue business as usual or return to the normal of circa pre-2020. Routine declarations of good intentions and public professions of anti-racism without any end-product will no longer do.

We say this because based on historical precedent we have serious concerns about Northwestern's willingness to implement strategic anti-racist policies. When a predominately white university publicly commits itself to tackling the structural problem of racism, there are usually two supplementary problems it glosses over. First, the problem of what is understood structurally as racism; and second, whether the prevailing institutional culture of whiteness is seen as a problem. These are the primary impediments to anti-racist actions that are usually never resolved, because they are never identified. Consequently, many predominantly white universities that profess to tackle racism, keep doing exactly that, professing. They make the same recommendations repeatedly, as if each repetition is the dawn of a new age. This has been our experience at Northwestern. We need to abolish the conditions under which the university

settles for identifying the veneer of racism, formulates public relations recommendations and then fails to implement those recommendations in a serial institutional pattern of failure. In short, there needs to be an effective institutional mechanism where the university's development of antiracist policies can be monitored and held to account by the university community.

### **The Specific Problem with Northwestern**

As Black faculty and more broadly as a department of African American studies, in a predominantly white university, we often find ourselves in the position of being challenged with trying to find ways of commenting on broad university policies in ways that do not make the wider white community unnecessarily silent, uncomfortable or even hostile. This can be an inordinate challenge when even the mere mention of race is all that it takes to produce these reactions. One consequence, should we refrain from upsetting many of our white colleagues, is that many university policies can be promoted as if Black people do not exist. Clearly our Northwestern leadership needs to accept it is on a steep learning curve. The rationale of developing policies against anti-Blackness lies in the recognition that the experience of university culture that Black students and Black faculty have may be very different from their white counterparts. Accountability for the non-implementation of these policies is therefore a minimum requirement if Northwestern is to be taken seriously by Black students and Black faculty. Unfortunately, we feel it is precisely this lack of accountability and consistency that haunts all the commitments expressed in President Schapiro's June 14<sup>th</sup> and September 10<sup>th</sup> public statements on what the university proposes to do about racism.

Actions matter, but so do words. On June the 14<sup>th</sup> Morton Schapiro, Northwestern's President, circulated a remarkable social justice statement that included the commitment, "to identify & address all forms of implicit/explicit racism on campus". President Schapiro also announced opposition to 'police brutality & anti-Blackness', outlining a list of social justice measures. Yet despite the additional declared opposition to anti-Blackness (a first), we were alarmed by the following commitment: "revisiting work of past task forces to assess past recommendations that have not yet been realized". While commendable it is less straightforward than it appears; it covers over a multitude of sins of promising but not delivering. Equally concerning by the time

of the September statement, we note this rhetorical stance had been diluted with all references to anti-Blackness and Black Lives Matter omitted as if no one would notice.

If we now look back to President Schapiro's June and September statements, we can identify a number of specific concerns:

1. In June we were told there were plans 'to raise specific funds to support the diversification of our student body and faculty', and in referring to 'black and other underrepresented students and scholars', he said this would be done by 'immediately providing resources to schools and departments so they can meet this commitment'. By September there was no longer any mention of this commitment, despite President Schapiro's prior insistence it would be carried out immediately.

2. In June it was promised that by September there will be an 'institutional policy requirement for diversified candidate slates for every staff position', and an 'inclusivity consultation team of administrators and faculty'. By September there was no longer any mention of this commitment or its deadline.

3. In June President Schapiro spoke of 'anti-racism training' being undertaken by 'senior administrators and academic leaders' this summer. Summer came and went without this deadline being met. In September the statement there was no longer any mention of a timetable for anti-racist training, this was changed to a future promise without a specified time. Equally, while we welcome the university's new interest in anti-racist training rather than simply diversity training, it remains a concern how the university proposes to distinguish between these different training philosophies. It should be noted diversity training is not necessarily anti-racist training.

4. President Schapiro has enlisted the consultation of the *Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group* to train 50 key leaders in a series of anti-racism and unconscious bias training sessions with an emphasis on action planning, and yet the university has faculty across several departments and units who might better educate the university on the very systematic and administrative practices that ensure the continuance of systemic racism. We have several questions. What qualifies the Jamison group to educate and assist Northwestern in this way at this moment? What role do consulting firms play in furthering the problem and giving cover to systemic practices under the

guise of well-meaning efforts at anti-racism? What challenge or vetting have they faced by way of an engagement with Northwestern's most critically informed faculty?

5. President Schapiro promises a new chief diversity officer, boasting of over 1,000 responses and 100 nominations. What were the achievements of the previous diversity officer? What will be the basis for evaluating feedback on the new diversity officer? What mandate will this officer have? What resources will be at their disposal to effect change? How will this be measured? Or, is this once again largely a kind of figurehead position aimed at giving cover to business as usual? Is this a way of institutionalizing the perception of anti-racist efforts being undertaken without any real commitment to making real change?

6. What is the role of the diversity council? What has their role been in the generation of President Schapiro's statements on June 14<sup>th</sup> and September 10<sup>th</sup>? How are they empowered to assist the hiring and retaining Black faculty? Do they have structural power to hold the central administration accountable? What is their relationship to the voting members of the Board of Trustees?

On the credit side, the university's commitment to renovating the 'Black House' as a social meeting place for students seems to be the only commitment that is guaranteed. Mentioned in both the June and September statements, it is good to hear it is slated to finish by March 2021.

However, it needs to be noted that in relation to each of the 10 commitments President Schapiro made in June, we were assured that we would hear from University leaders about 'specific plans and proposals' and how the 'Northwestern community can become involved'. So far, we have not heard anything. It is not the sincerity of the commitments we question; it is the track record of making these kinds of commitments without a follow through. Here we are drawing upon Northwestern's history with Black students and Black faculty. We have looked at recommendations made by Northwestern on these matters ever since it first responded to the protests and demands of Black students in 1968. What emerges are three things that have been continually been raised by Black students and Black faculty, that although acknowledged by Northwestern's leadership, have subsequently been shelved and then ignored. These are: the inhospitable white climate of Northwestern for Black students, the dearth of Black students and

the dearth of Black faculty. For nearly 50 years Northwestern has been making recommendations in each of these areas and largely it has been successful in only making further recommendations.

### **Black Students Matter**

In our experience it is Black students who are at the greatest disadvantage of experiencing Northwestern as inhospitably white. This should not be news to the university leadership. For example, over the last decade or so Northwestern working groups have repeatedly documented how undergraduate Black students have become increasingly dissatisfied with Northwestern.

- According to the University's 2018 Senior Survey on Black undergraduate student satisfaction, satisfaction is the lowest it has been in almost a decade. In 2010 there was 91% satisfaction, in 2016 it was 72% and since 2018 this had dropped to 67%.
- It was reported that 16% of Black students would never recommend Northwestern to Black high school students.
- Among students of color recruited to Northwestern Black students are now the lowest proportion.
- 60% of Black student respondents 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that students are respected at Northwestern regardless of race and ethnicity (this was double the next highest percentage by racial or ethnic group).
- Black students are 'overwhelmingly' and 'disproportionately' dissatisfied with the ethnic and racial diversity on campus.
- Black students report the lowest satisfaction with University administrators' responsiveness to student concerns.

When we examined Northwestern's 2016, 'Black student experience task force report', we noted the following:

- In relation to Northwestern being regarded as a safe place for Black students, welcoming to Black students, giving fair treatment to Black students, or supportive to Black students, a slightly higher proportion of Black students in each case disagreed than agreed.

- Black female students were less likely than Black male students to agree that Northwestern is welcoming to or a safe space for Black students.
- 53% of Black student respondents in a 2014 survey agreed they had witnessed or experienced harassment or discriminatory (race, gender, sexual orientation) behavior on campus.
- 60% of Black respondents in a 2015 survey reported they had ‘encountered discrimination’ while attending Northwestern.

Of great concern to us is that many of the recommendations made by the Task Force report in 2016 are very similar to the recommendations made in the Diversity working group report of 2010 for Northwestern’s subsequent strategic plan and resemble recommendations from other Northwestern committees in prior years to that. In this context of dereliction, it is troubling to note that in 2015, a Black former undergraduate student, Natalie Frazier, wrote an article in ‘Black Board’ (April 11), Northwestern’s Black Student Magazine, entitled ‘A Black Ass Nightmare: My Four years at Northwestern’. In that article (which is still available on-line), she recounted various dispiriting and painful racist incidents she had experienced around the campus during her four years, incidents that eventually demoralized her. Particularly indicting was her concluding remark: “To the Black northwestern students who will follow, you can accept this institution for what it is or work tirelessly to change it. Either way you are loved. I hope you make it through this white nightmare and reach your dreams”. While we are not suggesting the experience of one Black student, represents the experience of all Black students, we are suggesting that the context to which this Black student refers has through inaction and avoidance been allowed to fester without any real commitment to change it. The idea that Northwestern can be a nightmare for Black students is unacceptable. Nevertheless, the university keeps repeating recommendations to recruit more Black students and Black faculty, without asking the following questions: What is the climate and culture into which it is proposed this recruitment takes place? Why are these recruitment recommendations not being implemented? Why does Northwestern keep making the same recommendations which are not being implemented? It is one thing for Northwestern to respond to the national events of Black Lives Matter, it is quite another for us to respond to our own local Black history.



## **No Return to Normal**

We do not want to lose the opportunity to develop and implement tangible anti-racist, social and educational change. We all teach and research broadly in the fields that address structural racism, white supremacy and anti-Blackness, in a mostly white institutional setting where outside our department and a few others, those issues are largely misunderstood, misrepresented or marginalized. We are resources that can be consulted to inform and shepherd in these developments. We do not want to repeat the last 20 years where universities like ours have devoted themselves to pursuing objectives to combat inequalities and injustices by addressing equity & underrepresentation in the limited language of diversity. The problem with the reductionist language of diversity is that it expunges terms like racial inequality, racial injustice, structural racism & white supremacy from its lexicon, leaving in its reforming template descriptions of ethnic and social difference outside their representation in power relations like anti-Blackness. For far too long the university has asked policies on representation and diversity to do all the racial equality and justice work while leaving the structural forms of racism intact and unaddressed. We cannot go back to that normal. With the Federal government's anti-Black attacks on Critical Race Theory and Black History (e.g. the demonization of the 1619 Project), and the university's traditional institutional role in leaving unquestioned pedagogical and administrative structures of whiteness, it is imperative that we as a community now recommit ourselves, with both strategies and resources to expanding, African-American Studies, African Studies, Critical Ethnic Studies, Afro-Latin American Studies, Latinx studies and Asian American Studies. These commitments also require a more substantial engagement with Indigenous Studies and Decolonial studies in the production of new modes of knowledge production. In addition, the decades overdue university commitments to expand the Black student and Black faculty populations must become an urgent time-tabled priority. If the university is to move beyond the platitudes of the past, to which we are all accustomed, we need to move past the privileging of whiteness through the language and protocols of diversity aspirations that erase the incidence of structural racism as a problem. In short, Northwestern must stop promising endlessly and start delivering on its promises. We need a clearly defined timetable for deliverables.

## **Conclusion**

While we welcome President Schapiro's June 14<sup>th</sup> and September 10<sup>th</sup> Social Justice statements in principle, we lament that there appears to be in the September statement a move away from any overall commitment to addressing anti-Blackness in the context of the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, and instead a return to a generic diversity approach.

Northwestern appears to be reacting to events rather than developing a strategic approach to support for Black faculty, staff, students and sub-contractors. Other universities are developing strategic action plans that involve listening to the Black members of their community and have an explicit focus on anti-Black racism. It is also troubling that Northwestern has not so far expressed any intentions to respond to the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black and Brown populations. We urge Northwestern to respond to the greater propensity of the virus to affect Black and Brown faculty, students, administrators, staff and sub-contractors. As that consideration hovers over everything we have written here, we make remedial recommendations for Covid-19 below. At the same time, we want to underline recommendations in the areas of police, recruitment and support, pedagogy and community, as comprising urgent deliverables commensurate with the value that Black lives matter. Finally, it needs to be said that these minimal, in some cases long overdue recommendations, should not be interpreted as an alternative to tackling structural and anti-Black racism within the university. As a matter of imperative, that work still needs to be done.

## **Urgent Recommendations**

### **Covid-19**

1. Prioritize and timetable a plan to fund organizations and initiatives working to address health disparities and Covid-19 high risk Black and Brown communities by January 2021.
2. Prioritize and timetable a good neighbor plan to fund k-12 educational initiatives to ensure the redress of racial inequalities in the disparate impact of Covid-19 by January 2021.
3. Prioritize and timetable a plan for identifying in decision-making the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black and Brown faculty, students, administrators, staff and sub-contractors, by January 2021.

### **Police:**

1. Prioritize and timetable a plan for divesting all contracts with both Evanston and Chicago campus police departments and reinvesting in community safety schemes by January 2021.
2. Prioritize and timetable a plan to negotiate with both the Cities of Chicago and Evanston to develop local criminal justice reform, greater police accountability and public safety by July 2021.

### **Recruitment and Support:**

1. Prioritize and timetable a plan expanding the recruitment of Black students by January 2021.
2. Prioritize and timetable a plan for increasing staff of color in the university's Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS), as well as training for all clinicians and counselors working there on structural racism, by January 2021.
3. Prioritize and timetable a plan for increasing funding supports for low income students, that addresses relocation, travel home for breaks and holidays, and supports for bereavement and personal emergencies, by January 2021.
4. Prioritize and timetable a plan for expanding the recruitment of Black faculty across the Social Sciences, Humanities and STEM disciplines, especially at associate and full professor levels by January 2021.

### **Pedagogy**

1. Prioritize and timetable a plan the development of a 'Center for the Study of Slavery and the African Diaspora', by July 2021, as a commitment to the study of global Black histories and Black geographies.
2. Prioritize and timetable a plan by July 2021, for expanded financial commitments to the following programmatic units, to include FTEs, research funding, scholarships for Black undergraduate majors and minors, high school students and renewed fundraising commitments for: African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Latinx Studies, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and the Center for Native and Indigenous Research.

### **Community**

1. Prioritize and timetable a plan to commit \$10 million to call for bold, innovative proposals that seek local and global academic and nonacademic partnerships aimed at addressing issues of racial justice locally and globally, by July 2021.
2. Prioritize and timetable a plan for establishing partnerships with HBCUs, committing funding for the development of exchange programs that bring HBCU students and professors to Northwestern for a semester, programs that allow NU students and professors to spend a semester on their campuses, by July 2021.
3. Prioritize and timetable a plan to run a summer school for high school students in Chicago and Evanston on global Black histories by July 2021.

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