

# Faculty of English Graduate Students Statement on Anti-Racism, Decolonisation and Black Lives Matter

## **Circulated letter:**

The following letter is intended to respond to and expand upon the recent communication from the Faculty of English regarding commitments to anti-racism.

As DPhil and Masters students in the Faculty of English, we welcome our Faculty's recognition that systemic and structural racism continues to shape Oxford, and that there is an urgent need for change. We also agree that this transformative work should not be put on those already marginalised. The steps taken by the Faculty to ensure that overt cases of racism are dealt with timeously through harassment advisors and other outlets, and the general mental health resources made available by the university continue to be of a significant benefit to many of us.

We condemn the recent murder of George Floyd and the ongoing systemic racism and violence against black people in the United States, which is a product of the history of slavery in which the United Kingdom actively participated. Violent racism is not unique to the United States of America. Britain's legacy of empire is a legacy of violence, oppression and domination which we seek continually to address and bring into view through a variety of research programmes, student activism and community initiatives.

In recent years, there has been increased attention to how the University of Oxford is complicit in the troubled histories of Empire, from the Codrington plantation millions which funded All Soul's College, to Balliol Master Benjamin Jowett's desire to see "an Oxford man at the top of every tree", and Cecil Rhodes' wish to see English values carried to every corner of the globe. We welcome a continued conversation about these histories as an aspiration towards building a University that is truly welcoming to all its members, especially those from BAME communities.

We affirm the work of student activism, and wish to draw attention to the incongruity that much of this is perceived as "fringe" and an "optional" activity by the university. The work of BAME reps in the JCRs, MCRs, and SCR, as well as governing bodies, is unpaid, and such positions are by no means available in every college. The activist work done by the students in Common Ground is self-initiated outside the auspices of the university and contributes much to the vibrancy of the Oxford community. It receives charitable funding from several JCRs but there is scope to recognise and structurally include this as part of the University's responsibility to its BAME members. The work by other students working on the Uncomfortable Oxford

project is largely volunteer labour, and self-sustaining as a private enterprise through walking tours.

We note that there are several academic initiatives at Oxford such as the Race & Resistance research network at TORCH, and the Alternative Curriculum reading group, which is self-organised. This diversity work is however overwhelmingly unpaid, and people of colour are required to take on extra duties to keep the conversation open. It is time that these initiatives and the efforts of students of colour are met with material support from institutions. To that end the attached Resources appendix lists relevant stakeholders who could benefit from support.

In order to build on the Faculty's commitment to dismantle existing patterns of privilege, and in recognition of the role English Studies can play in this work, we ask further that the Faculty incorporate these actions into its future response:

(1) An explicit recognition from the Faculty that Oxford has benefited financially from colonial extraction and labour. We ask that the faculty commit to supporting a university wide inquiry into the financial and structural legacy of slavery and colonialism as has been initiated at the Universities of Essex and Cambridge.

(2) So as to develop a better picture of how inherited racist or imperialist structural practices dictate patterns of work in the current Faculty, we ask that resources are committed to projects aimed at better understanding the history of the Faculty itself, including with respect to race and imperialism.

(3) We ask that the Faculty take a positive position against residual symbols of racism and imperialism at the University, including the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. We consider this essential in creating an environment that is welcoming rather than hostile to black students, who continue to experience racist practices in their everyday lives.

(4) Building on the Faculty's recognition that, because the graduate, especially DPhil cohort (as well as Faculty teaching staff) remains largely white, steps are needed to recruit and retain non-white students and staff, we ask for the publications of Faculty recruitment and retention guidelines that will ensure greater representivity, or the initiation of a process of transparent consultation to develop guidelines of this nature.

(5) We ask that in facilitating a process of developing courses and curriculum which contribute to diversifying and decolonising current teaching practices that all periods are treated

inclusively, and that 'postcolonial' pedagogy not be considered a purely twentieth century preoccupation or a specialist 'discipline'.

(6) In recognition that racism and imperialism has actively impoverished black people, we ask that for the development of Faculty-specific funding mechanisms such as bursaries, stipends and scholarships to facilitate the attendance of more BAME students.

(7) As Faculty of English graduates, we recognise that changes in representation of the curriculum and faculty are part of a broader project of reforming patterns of exclusion. We ask that the faculty continue to use its influence to promote greater access to literacy wherever possible.

We remain committed to working with the faculty to bring about reform, and continue to be appreciative of the anti-racist and anti-imperialist work done by many members of staff through their publications, their relationships with their colleges, and their activism in their broader communities. Building on the good work that has been done in recent years in forums like the Postcolonial Writing and Theory Seminar, and Writers Make Worlds, we write in order to solidify the heartening promises made by the Faculty, and hope to continue to provide support in this time of change.

If you would like to sign this letter, and/or contribute further suggestions to the Faculty, please fill in this Google Form: [Anti-Racism and Decolonisation in the Faculty of English, Oxford](#)  
Please note that you are not required to sign the letter to make suggestions. The letter will remain live and signatures will be added to it on a daily basis.

You can see our current list of practical suggestions [here](#).