

## Open Statement on Anti-Racism and Dismantling Anti-Blackness in Research and Teaching

Africana Studies Institute (ASI) , University of Connecticut,  
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We live, seemingly, in unprecedented times. The majority of people in our country face daily crises and agitation because of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment and economic insecurity, and floundering national (and some state) leadership whose institutions and actions lean as much toward violence and inhumanity as they do ineptitude. And while many groups have suffered loss of life, wealth, median income, and jobs because of the pandemic, across the board Blacks and people of color (POC) more broadly, have sustained much greater blows in <sup>1</sup> terms of economic instability and health disparities, state and legal attacks, as well as resource inaccess, because of their *pre-Covid -19* wealth, health, food, housing, and education insecurities. <sup>2</sup>

As a collective of Africana Studies scholars who for decades have thought critically about race, culture, history, economy, and the place of Black life in North America, there is very little new about the murder of George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. We know these recent murders are not any “escalation” of anti-Black violence in our nation. On the contrary, we believe they are the status quo because our research and that of so many others, as well as our life experiences bear this out. In fact, we are clear that the only novel aspect of these recent police-sponsored murders is both their visual capture on cell phones and public release of the footage. We know quite well that these murders represent business as usual in the United States. In the last two decades, vulnerable unarmed Black people, some in need of assistance, others, simply going about daily life, have been killed by police officers’ absolute disregard for human life. Especially Black lives.

So regularly do we as ASI faculty teach and research the legacy of racist power and its use against communities, families, and individuals, that we take for granted the vastness of this reality. We are angry that communities of color, non-binary people, sexually fluid people, whether Black, Latinx, Asian, Native Peoples, Arab, or Caribbean suffer disproportionate unemployment, poor living conditions, limited educational opportunities, health inequalities, as

<sup>1</sup>Anti-Asian violence in the United States, global spikes in domestic violence, Native communities

astronomically high COVID-19 death rates, all are specific examples of the way COVID-19 has attacked non-White populations disproportionately. <sup>2</sup>According to the *Washington Post* (June 5, 2020), the Labor Department reports (June 2020) unemployment rates of 17.6 percent among Latinx populations, 16.8 percent among Blacks, 15 percent among Asian populations, and 12.4 percent from 14.2 percent among Whites. Latinx unemployment dropped from 18.9 to 17.6, which still is the highest rate of unemployment. Despite a reported increase in 2.5 million jobs in May, unemployment rose among Asian populations (from 14.5 to 15 percent) and Blacks (16.7 to 16.8 percent).

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well as victimization through legal misconduct, extrajudicial killings, forced separation of young children from their parents, and unlawful seizure and incarceration. Their lives and experiences hold both different and shared histories; their histories are singular as well as analogous. Yet, none of these are interchangeable. Each deserves depth of study, research, collaboration and engagement, and cannot stand in for or fully represent the other. And we believe the term “diversity,” with its emphasis on cultural representation without structural change obfuscates and silences the historical specificity of racial, gendered, and sexual violence and renders these experience insignificant. As an institution of higher education we must recognize the lacunae of institutional supports for these areas of teaching and research. From multiple disciplinary perspectives, through our pedagogy and research, we strive to make clear how the viability of our nation’s collective future depends on our rejection of both the standard bearer of White supremacy and the mantra of Black *inhumanity*.

Therefore, we believe, minimally, that structural changes at educational institutions must begin immediately. Otherwise, we perpetuate the aggregate violence of past moments: the moment adrenaline shoots through the killer’s chest as they grab their gun to hunt down someone in broad daylight; the moment an unarmed jogger just blocks from his own home sustains 3 point-blank rifle shots to the abdomen, then falls on the road bleeding to death; the moment the jogger’s mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, closes her front door, exiting for the last time the home she once shared with her son. It’s the 8-minute, 46-second moment of full body weight on George Floyd’s neck, cutting off his air supply while George, narrating his own death, groans “I can’t breathe” and intermittently calls for his mother to come save her son. It’s the moment most of us apprehend the urgency of working together, struggling in mutual respect and deference to rebuild our shared humanity.

We want to clarify that protests across this country are not a desire to burn and loot. Rather, as many have already argued, for people of color America’s “social contract”

(that decency and work ethic entitle us to healthcare, liveable wages, quality education, and respect for human life) long ago was returned to us in shreds. We believe the protesters highlight how much we need serious national debate about the historical development of structural, systemic, and institutional racism in the United States. The protesters in our streets have thrown down the gauntlet to each of us to reevaluate morality and humanity. Thus, we stand in complete solidarity with protests across the country that demand an end to police terror and wanton disregard for human lives--especially Black lives .

We want to name a very few recent victims of anti-Black police violence. Some are familiar while others are lesser known: David McAtee, Atatiana Jefferson, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Yvette Smith, Walter Scott, Laquan McDonald, Michael Brown, Travon Martin, Tamir Rice, Oscar Grant, Botham Jean, Kendra James, Amadou Diallo, Tony McDade, Angel Ramos, Tanisha Anderson, Shereese Francis, Darnisha Harris, Anthony Jose Chulo Vega Cruz, Freddie Gray, Magdiel Sanchez, Tarika Wilson (and her infant son who police shot twice but who unlike his mother, survived), Ruben Maya, 92 year-old Kathryn Johnston, 7 year-old Ayiana Stanley Jones, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. We ASI faculty know the list is far too long for any meaningful accounting here or to be explained by “rogue officers” or as isolated incidents. Research shows that for years police officers have killed well over a thousand people annually, the vast majority of whom are people of color (POC) and unarmed, are engaged in non-criminal activity, or are stopped for traffic violations. We also know officers commit atrocities by and large with impunity (policeviolencereport.org). So how *do* we understand this long and vitriolic history against Black lives?

We first must link the murder of George Floyd to its historical context. That is, for those who insist that his death is an aggrandizing, exaggerated outcry, an isolated and unfortunate occurrence, remember that the nation’s oldest continuously running newspaper, *The Hartford Courant*, freely participated in Black exploitation. Once upon a time not very long ago the *Courant* reaped advertising dollars by selling slaves on its pages and publishing slave owner rewards for captured runaways. That is, the newspaper freely supported trafficking Black bodies. Scholarship shows that Mr. Floyd’s death rightfully is linked to the history of slavery and policing in the United States. As early as the 1700s, slaveholders and non-slaveholders formed patrol teams to protect wealth and property, suppress slave rebellions, and capture runaways. A century later, in 1838, with industrialization on the rise, the first police department in the nation emerged in Boston, followed by departments across the country. Newly installed as a

public service, the creation of police departments shifted the cost of private property protection to taxpayers. As happens today, nineteenth-century police targeted free Blacks under the premise that they were innately criminal, an ingrained practice that guides police assumptions today.

Because we know anti-Black violence happens daily as it has for centuries, we want to be clear that we advocate for discussions that specifically invoke the term anti-Blackness. The term RACISM, which, while meaningful nomenclature to signal White supremacy wielded against people racialized as the Other, sometimes does not adequately explain why the police target and devalue Black lives so often; it does not reveal why in this country Black lives are disposable. As an institution of higher education we need concrete institutional support for these areas of teaching and research. We also believe that in practice RACISM ranges from violent acts of imposition to subtle institutional arrangements that help to sustain these systematic aggressions. RACISM, understood uncritically, can be a catchall idea that lacks the precision and historical specificity needed to convey how anti-Blackness silences, marginalizes, negates Black intellectual and creative capacities, utterly rejects Black leadership, and kills because it does not recognize Black humanity. RACISM, if understood uncritically, may sometimes obscure how White supremacy “hyper-consumes” Blackness, presses its knee into

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the necks of those of us racialized as Black. In order to fully capture the history of anti-Black <sup>3</sup> violence we advocate for language that includes both racism and anti-Blackness. We contend the appropriate term for the murder and systematic oppression of Black people is anti-Blackness.

As ASI faculty we would like to underscore that we are not the sole, privileged authority on the machinations of anti-Black and racialized power. There are generations of scholar-activists as well as contemporary activists and intellectuals who have studied these questions more painstakingly than our collective, have produced more scholarship, articulated more sophisticated analyses, more often demanded change, rallied, and publicly sounded a clarion call against anti-Black violence, and who consistently have been minimized or altogether ignored. Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, Eric Williams, Cedric Robinson, W.E.B Du Bois, David Walker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, Assata

Shakur, and contemporary scholars Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Robin D.G. Kelley, Josh Kun, Gaye Theresa Johnson, Andrea Ritchie, Michelle Wright, and so many others around the globe have led strong Black consciousness, anti-White supremacy traditions. As ASI faculty, we know this. Indeed, this legacy informs our work. We have produced scholarship, publicly lectured, and used informed pedagogy to continue to pull back the curtain on the long history of institutionalized anti-Black violence and its prevalence, by design, in our country. More importantly, as scholars of Black consciousness we assert our intellectual and scholarly worth by challenging the anti-Blackness that imprints scholarly production. It is why we believe our expertise and integration in any enduring strategy to dismantle anti-Black, racist violence on campus, more than considered must be presumed vital. After all, our campus institutes and cultural centers emerged in the 1980s and 90s out of frustration with insidious campus inequity, conflict, and aggression compounded by too many inadequate responses to anti-Black racism and the openly-perpetuated aggression against people of color. So, how do we, in and outside of ASI, as scholars and instructors, as a campus and institution, teach and research, collaborate and push back against the silences and violence embedded in America's record on race?

The solution is both layered and inclusive. It requires participation across campus schools, colleges, and units. Broad anti-racist campus partnerships are essential and we must acclimate and respect atypical leadership if we are to change the status quo. Thus, a commitment to non-White leadership must be a point of departure. Further, our collective understanding of racism is often confused and non-specific. As Critical Discourse Analysis and Whiteness Studies scholar Dr. Robin DiAngelo states, "...people simplistically reduce racism to a matter of 'nice

<sup>3</sup> Njee, Nyambura (2016). "Share Cropping Blackness: White Supremacy and the Hyper-Consumption of Black Popular Culture," *McNair Scholars Research Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 10. <https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol9/iss1/10>.

people' vs. 'mean people.'" "More often than not," she further argues, "racism is thought of as a series of discrete acts committed by individual people rather than as a complex, interconnected system.." And as White, anti-racist author and activist Tim Wise suggests, <sup>4</sup> "American history is one in which White Americans by and large have been taught to have indifference or contempt for Black life." Yet he also goes on to state, "If you think the monster in the room [racism] is the one you've never seen before...you don't know how to fight it, it knocks you off balance...we just have to keep doing what

folks have always been doing...” And <sup>5</sup> finally, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, states, “These are our bright years of emergence; though they are painful ones, they cannot be avoided.” Taylor, DiAngelo, and Wise’s important <sup>6</sup> observations together can support clearer understanding of racism’s inner workings and be used as change agents rather than our resignation to an immutable position.

What ASI faculty propose, then, is to dedicate institutional efforts to oppose White supremacy, systemic racism, and anti-Black violence. We strongly propose 1) shifting a cluster of Africana courses from electives to required curricula for all academic programs; 2) a permanent, year-long, Africana artist-in-residence program to showcase the forms and impacts of Black creativity and pollinate our campus; 3) every entering freshman at UConn takes a required course in dismantling anti-Blackness and anti-racism; 4) as each UConn undergraduate student declares a major/minor course of study, they must complete a specialized course in their major field that addresses anti-Blackness and anti-racism in the field; 5) all graduate programs, irrespective of field, require course work in anti-Blackness and anti-racism (this includes all campus units and requires course development and faculty hires); 6) changing our campus environment to protect its vulnerable populations and for the growth and development of majority populations through a standing, provost advisory committee on anti-racism, ethno-centrism, and dismantling anti-Black violence throughout the UConn community.

The permanent committee, which would not “study” anti-Blackness and racism at UCONN would be charged with policy implementation. It would be constituted after other, dismantling and anti-racism actions are taken and it must be integrated into the policies and resource allocation decisions at the level of the Provost’s Office. It might be titled Provost’s Academic Advisory Board on Race, Ethnicity, and Anti-Black Consciousness. At least sixty percent Black, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American faculty for whom race and/or ethnicity is a primary research and teaching analytic must comprise this permanent advisory board. Finally, we insist that the Provost and/or President’s Office establish an annual prize for scholarly excellence in Race and/or Ethnicity or Racial/Ethnic Intersectional Studies, which will be conferred at a President’s or Provost’s award ceremony for significant innovation and/or excellence.

<sup>4</sup>Robin DiAngelo, public lecture on her book, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, University of Washington, July 3, 2018. <sup>5</sup>Tim Wise, “Race and Whiteness,”

lecture delivered May 10, 2017, All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA. <sup>6</sup>Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BLACKLIVESMATTER TO BLACK LIBERATION*. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 1.

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Without these essential reconfigurations we relegate many of our students and certain colleagues to continued racialized beliefs and practices. We reject racial aggression in its myriad forms including how it often is cast as no more concrete than an innocuous difference of opinion. As an institution we must name the violent legacy of anti-Black and anti-POC practices and link them to their deadly consequences. The choice is stark: either we work to dismantle anti-Black racism and dedicate resources to support people of color and anti-racist work on our campus or remain indifferent to the deaths of many, many more Mr. Floyds.

We believe we should be asked to ply our expertise and leadership on campus scholarly and pedagogical discussions of race. As ASI faculty we recognize that we must play a leading role in research support programs and producing scholarship that supports anti-racism and anti-sexism. We believe our ASI institute curriculum and programming, which are designed to reveal the depth of Black and Brown experiences in everyday life should be tapped frequently to engage questions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and poverty as fundamental to the university's research and teaching missions. This fall, for example, ASI faculty will hold a roundtable on Ibram X. Kendi's book, *How to Be An Antiracist*, which should be required reading for UConn's entire community and the flashpoint of an ongoing, university-wide discussion of the machinations of race.

We also believe that real commitment to change is made through action not words. We insist that the university maintain a permanent anti-racism, dismantle anti-Blackness oversight body at the President's level that will have as an immediate goal shifting UConn's academic emphases and the tenor of campus life to respond to anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism as well as the intellectually impoverished educational and research opportunities these breed. We insist that university administrators improve the accuracy and analytic depth, the scope and range of education on our campus (including regional campuses) by requiring all academic programs to include a minimum of 6 hours of course work and depth of study (and the faculty hires needed to fulfill this mandate) on racism, sexism, and anti-Blackness and their impacts on all aspects of our society, including the structures of students' specific career paths and professional fields; the university must address

its historic and egregious low percentages (at rates that have gone nearly unchanged for at least the past four decades) of Black and Latinx faculty with no less than a 300 percent increase each, of Black and Latinx faculty within the next 5 years. We insist as well on increased Asian American and Native faculty hires on campus by 100 percent. We also insist that the university hire 500 percent more non-White support staff than currently exists, as many schools and colleges have less than a handful to no non-White staff assistants and administrators. Just as significant if not moreso, upper administration must solicit and study information and exit-interview data to bolster retention efforts among Black (and Latinx faculty), including tasking a university officer/administrator to do so; the university must foster wholistic sensibilities and full participation of non-Whites in university leadership at all administrative levels and correlative of the percentage of Black and other non-White student populations at UConn. UConn must enhance research funding support for faculty of color as well as conduct annual award ceremonies to demonstrate publicly upper administration recognition of the richness and rigor of scholarship produced by non-White UConn faculty, despite the aggressions they face in their professional lives.

We believe the university must put human and financial resources toward these goals immediately and permanently. Our administrators and community must commit to this as much now as when the cameras are gone and the protests and headlines subside. As ASI faculty we do this work every day, every semester, and every year, whether or not there is a high-profile event. And we will continue to do so because the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and thousands of others are not aberrations. Sandra Bland's 2015 arrest for not using her turn signal and subsequent death in jail have their time-honored place on the continuum of racial aggressions that POC expect. To repeat the familiar, these are deeply-rooted attacks on Black lives, only a tiny fraction of which are captured by cell phone memory for the world to see in plain view.

Suggested  
Readings:

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/george-floyd-anti-blackness.html>

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