

These letters were written by English department faculty to their students at the end of spring quarter 2020. They are in random order and only one minor edit has been made. – Susan Zieger

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Dear All of You,

It has been my privilege to work with you this quarter, one that none of us could have imagined. Your persistence, commitment to your education, and generosity with one another have meant a great deal to me.

I have often of late heard people say that we are living in unprecedented times. But this is not true. State-sponsored violence, systemic racism, and brutality founded this country and are its lifeblood. The deaths of George Floyd in Minnesota, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, Nina Pop in Missouri, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Sean Reed in Indiana, Tony McDade in Florida, Philando Castile in Minnesota, Sandra Bland in Texas, Eric Garner in New York, Michael Brown in Missouri – and countless others killed at the hands of police and racist vigilantes – these deaths are not unprecedented. The history of violence against black and brown and Indigenous bodies is the history of the United States. The current wave of hatred against Muslims, immigrants, Latinx communities, queer and trans communities, and Asian/Americans (inventors and carriers of COVID-19) is consistent with that history.

In the midst of all this, is there any reason to hope?

YES. Battered and disenfranchised communities have always held on to hope and to the belief that change is possible, however slowly and incrementally it may come. They have held on to the will to fight, speak out, organize and protest. And they have held on to love. We have held on.

I have watched you exercise care and respect for one another. Many of you have taken action, showing courage and strength. You have shared your struggles and difficulties, both ongoing and immediate, but you have nevertheless pushed on with grace, determination, kindness, and humor. You give me hope because you don't give up. One of the primary reasons that faculty stay here at UCR is you, our students. You have smarts but also imagination, openness, and grit. I wish you all the very best as you move through the world that you are going to change. It has been my honor to be your professor.

In peace and solidarity,
Traise Yamamoto

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Dear students,

I am writing to check in with you all and to register the fact that once again, our academic work together has been interrupted by incalculable trauma and loss. You have been working valiantly on your studies through an unimaginable period of compounding personal & cultural losses. And now, just when we thought our quarter was coming to an end, we are confronted once again with the specter of repeated police brutality against black and brown bodies in our country. I cannot imagine asking you all to continue working as if George Floyd's death and the aftermath we've been witnessing were not occurring on our streets and in our media feeds.

Working with you all this quarter has been a privilege and a joy, and I can only imagine how different it would have been if we had been able to work on these materials together, side by side. You have already accomplished a huge amount—and you should be proud of that. What I can do to try to alleviate the stress many of you are feeling right now is change my grading policy. I am changing these things effective immediately:

- Final grades: **All students will receive an A in 151T** as your final grade

[more course-specific practical changes have been edited out]

The grief and outrage I feel over what has been happening is hard to process; I assume many of you feel the same way. If you need to speak with someone trained to help you in this kind of circumstance, please go to <https://counseling.ucr.edu>.

Our optional Zoom meeting is still scheduled tomorrow at 11am; if you would like additional meetings for your group this week, please let me know. In the meantime, please take care of yourselves!

Best,
ADB

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In “Uses of the Erotic,” the first essay we read and whose ideas have framed all of our discussions, Audre Lorde reminds us that “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.” In another essay, Lorde also implores us to know that “caring for myself [ourselves] is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.” Her words carry as much meaning for us today as we face a world on fire, and as we pursue genuine change that nourishes black life, let us also know in our hearts that caring for ourselves and for each other is a necessary and urgent act of self-preservation.

--Armando Garcia

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POLICE VIOLENCE, PEACEFUL PROTEST AND SO-CALLED LOOTING

In class on Monday I promised you some notes on my own response to the civil disobedience of the last few days. Below are some thoughts that are as considered as they can be in the immediate wake of ongoing events. Maybe you will agree, maybe you will disagree. Do use this space to express your own feelings and offer your own analyses of what's been going down to relay your experience of it and, hopefully, your sense both of the lessons and the potentialities that might be drawn from what has felt to many a very perilous moment, given how many other uncertainties face us all right now. I look forward to reading your thoughts.

Throughout this quarter we have been studying aspects of US law, including its settler colonial origins and ongoing legacies, the relation of property to racial exclusion and dispossession, the violence on which the law rests even in its everyday workings, and the ways we talk or tell stories that justify or challenge the law. And all quarter, our discussions have been shadowed both by the actual state of exception in which we have had to conduct our work together and by the omnipresence of police violence and racial disparity, whether in the enforcement of the state of emergency or in the impact of COVID-19. Over the last few days, the ugly face of police violence and ordinary people's disgust with it have been more manifest than ever.

Some of you may have joined the protests of the last few days in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and in honor of an ever-growing list of names, including not only George Floyd in Minnesota but also Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, Nina Pop in Missouri, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, and many, many others. Some of you may just have watched the unfolding events on the news. Whichever you did, you may have noted the huge discrepancy between the overwhelming nonviolence of the protests--meaning not a lack of righteous anger, frustration, exclamation and fury, but a refusal to inflict violence on the persons even of those seeking to put protest down--and the reportage that focused continually on a handful of people who used the opportunity to get some stuff. The real grounds for the uprising of people fed up with the violence of the law is obscured by this skewed narrative which was, I am sure you have noted, shifting the focus from the narrative of police violence--since they became once again the protectors rather than the violators--to the narrative of private property.

And what has been occluded in that process is the bigger story of what has been going on in recent years, or, indeed, since the origins of European colonialism on this continent, namely, a huge project of looting that Karl Marx called "primitive accumulation and David Harvey more recently the ongoing process of "accumulation by dispossession." While shock and horror was being expressed at the sight of people--mostly shown as people of color--taking away a handful of commodities from stores, what was not mentioned was the billions of dollars that have been siphoned from the public treasury to a handful of corporations and oligarchs under the cover of

the public health crisis. That cynical appropriation of the common fund is just part of a general upward distribution of wealth in this country that has been ongoing for a couple of decades of ever-growing inequality. Call it looting, if you like: it is the general process of accumulation that this capitalist system involves and which is paid for first of all by people of color, the poor, the marginalized, those made house-less by gentrification and rent gouging, those whose right to education is taken from them by privatization and ballooning debt, another mode of plundering the common goods.

What has been going on over the last few days can't be understood outside that context. If George Floyd's brutal murder was the spark, the keg is the immense system of injustice and deprivation that has been going on with an even greater bold-facedness than shocked the TV reporters when they saw it in a small shoe store or jeans outlet. If you have felt angry and dismayed, if you have felt anxious that this nation is becoming riven by rage and by the fanning of that rage in the name of injustice by the president and others in positions of power and influence, if you have felt threatened by the prospect of violence, whether by the police or more randomly, if you have felt your right to protest being limited, or your right to education curtailed, then you too share in the motives and emotions that have driven the vast majority of the protesters in their astonishingly nonviolent and buoyant demonstrations of popular refusal of massive structural and targeted violence. In the spontaneity and mobility of the protests, you may have glimpsed in action what Robert Cover calls "jurisgenerativity"; in the "looting", however random it might have seemed, you may have been witnessing at some level a visceral backlash at the relation between property and racial exclusion; in the police's resort to so-called "rubber bullets" (actually steel projectiles coated in a velvet glove), you are witnessing the deployment in the United States of counter-insurgency techniques developed in colonial sites from Northern Ireland to Palestine.

Hopefully our reading this quarter has given you some tools to help you both to analyze the general conditions caused by the state's response COVID-19 and to the racial disparities that that response lays bare and to think about what the last few days of civil disobedience have shown about the links between various levels and dimensions of the structure, from police violence to the violence of inadequate housing, health care or education. At times of crisis--which really means at all times--it's important to shape our response by drawing on the tools and concepts that our thinking together in calmer times may have made available. And education that does not supply us with such tools is scarcely an education at all. Hopefully your studies at UCR and elsewhere have helped you to assemble those tools and hopefully you will continue to study on or off the campus, until and after graduation, with transformation and justice in mind.

-- David Lloyd

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Hi everyone,

I want to begin by saying how impressed I have been by the interest and joy you have collectively brought to reading Dickinson's poetry and imagining her life. I've learned so much teaching this class.

I fear, however, that the President's words and actions in that last few hours have made the immediate future so unstable that I can't reasonably expect that you will have the time and energy to complete the work for this class.

I have increasingly struggled with questions of fairness and respect this quarter. Students are experiencing very basic differences in situation that make a mockery of the idea of fairness. The distress of the pandemic has now been compounded by explosions of age-old American realities of racism, violence, and inequality. At the same time, in individual conversations with many of you, I have been so heartened by your expressed desire to learn, to not be cheated out of your right to do so.

Here is the best solution I can offer:

I will give any student a grade based on whatever work they have completed to this point. Email me a request and I will let you know asap what that grade is. If it is not a B or better, we will talk about what is possible for you to do at this point.

Some students will complete every assignment and earn an A. Others may have completed half as many individual assignments and earned an A. The unfairness is to those who were committed to the work of the class and could not be reasonably expected to finish all as assigned. Those who can and do complete the assigned work will have the benefit of feedback.

As I said, I have struggled with questions of fairness, but also with questions of respect. You deserve the right to do this work, to do it well and have it recognized. My comments will be the best way for me to show that respect.

I am heartsick this evening as sirens blare and helicopters hover even in Riverside with no apparent threat of violence. I may not answer email until morning, but I will answer.

Best,
Professor Kinney

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What's Going On? by Prof. Vorris Nunley

We have discussed anti-black logics, whiteness as property, and white supremacy. With George Floyd's death, my abstract proclamations and definitions have been made concrete. Palpable. You, me, we, feel in it in the marrow of our bones. Our souls shaken. Our despair ignited.

Why?

We have witnessed a lynching. This was not Emmett Till. Battered, bloody, and bloated body violated in a quasi-public sphere. No. Like many lynchings, George Floyd's lynching was all so very, very public. A murder most foul. Done, not with a scream. Not with a loud grunt of satisfaction. But with a knowing sly smile A snide snicker. We are haunted by the image. By the preening, self-satisfied smirk of white, male, masculinist supremacy. A smirk reminding all who could and would see that, with the support of the nation-state, the worst has become normal. Typical. Natural.

A knee physically rooting itself directly on a black neck, black experiences, and black lives. And metaphorically embodying a knee beating the life from Vincent Chin, enslaving "black" folk, snapping the neck of Sandra Bland, interning Japanese Americans, terrorizing queer, Trans, and others at Stonewall, baptizing the physical bodies, spiritual souls, and metaphysical being of Native Americans in genocidal American imperialism, and stealing lands from Mexico in the name of God and Texas.

Yet my own despair is tempered. For it is not only your despair that has been ignited, but also your courage. Not the easy, reactionary, toxic, masculine courage loved by far too many Americans, embodied in the President, and conveyed by the trope of the knee. But the sublime courage of resistance found in the mundane of the everyday by everyday people. Like you. Courage informed by the Latin *cor* for heart. Heart related to feeling? Yes. But more. Heart ennobled by to the willingness to speak one's mind and heart. Throughout the ages, folks have died practicing such courage. Refused humiliation speaking with and through such courage. You live and march with them.

Yours is the courage of real life. Of coming to terms with the barely comprehensible. And you have practiced your courage without being able to take solace in what James Baldwin referred to as the "paraphernalia of safety": Remote learning (God help us all). Retail stores, Restaurants, closed. Jobs furloughed. Lives lost.

Still:

Both parents of one of your classmates lost their jobs. She had to move. Increase her hours to support her family. Racked with exhaustion, she finally fell down. Directly on her face. I saw it close-up during a Zoom meeting. Damn.

But guess what? She is still here. And so are you. Again, you should be proud. When we talk during class, it is palpable to me how many of you refused to have the life pressed from you by the viral knee of the pandemic. You have pushed hard. Clawed through. Endured. Overcome. Loved your families intently (even when you wanted nothing more than a little space of your own). Kept it loose. And made it funky. And you all know how I/we/Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead value *the funk*.

No university, white supremacy, or cowardly cop with a smile can squeeze your courage from you. You have encountered a virus and refused to collapse. Resisted black social death. Strained against illness. And you are still here. Viewed a lynching. And marched. And you are still here.

You have pressed on. And that, that, is what is really is going on.

Vorris Nunley