

Appendix A: My Response to a Campus-wide Survey

Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2017

To: Working Group on equity and Inclusion
From: Joan Hepburn
Re: A Survey on the Campus Environment

Dear Working Group:

I agree with my colleagues that the survey poses problems. I am especially concerned about how it avoids language specific to race discrimination, the thing that started all of us talking. Therefore, I did not complete the survey. In any case, one of my favorite authors has much to say about such acts as these.

In her powerful analysis of the fictive worlds of American writers entitled *Playing in the Dark* (2015), Nobel laureate Toni Morrison discusses the simple expedient of inventing demonized Africa, dominating categories, processes of distancing and exclusion, among other habits of racialized discourse on cultural hegemony in the United States—all of this while long canonized authors and scholars disguise, evade, or attempt to erase evidence of these social norms. A close reading of “literary blackness” and “literary whiteness” reveals how intrinsic to American letters these cultural patterns are. But the habit of ignoring race forecloses debate. It’s a way of enforcing invisibility, of forcing silence, and of making blacks participate in the culture’s assertion of dominance. This hidden agenda has always been the object of racist discourse, practices, policies, and attitudes. It perpetuates or sustains, even anchors the status quo and dismisses all else as political, gutting truth and transparency and denying reality (8-10).

For me to complete the “inclusion” survey sent out by the Working Group, I would have to position myself as white, for whites are the intended audience, given the language devoted to their comfort, this despite inviting everyone to contribute to a new St. Olaf narrative or brand. I cannot complete it because I am black and much disappointed and distressed at being asked to participate yet again in the heavy lifting of bridging linguistic and social gaps on campus. Those of us in the minority are expected to do this.

Personally I feel especially frustrated and fatigued by the evidence of exclusion from this marketing instrument, especially after the hard work of the Collective on the Hill last spring and the Task Force on Institutional Racism last summer. This survey to safeguard the feelings of whites ignores mine. Still, I applaud whoever listens and actually acknowledges the challenges of working toward honest dialogue and real change, those who read deeply, raise meaningful questions, and have ears to hear. Thank you.

Joan Hepburn
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P. S. Because of my long-standing computer problems, I enclose the documents that people generally send as attachments or Google documents. You stand a better chance of receiving them.