

WELLESLEY COLLEGE

FRENCH DEPARTMENT

French Department Statement in Support of Wellesley 4 Black Students and the Black Lives Matter Movement (August 1, 2020)

The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black lives earlier this year have sparked international outrage and widespread protests against police violence, systemic racism and white supremacy. The French Department at Wellesley College joins the local and national movement in support of Black lives, racial justice, and efforts to dismantle the structural racism that pervades the foundation and organization of U.S. institutions. We echo the urgency of the demands voiced by Black students at Wellesley and recognize the need to face head-on the institutional racism of the college.

As scholars and educators, we know that academia, in general, and French Studies, in particular, bear a measure of responsibility for enabling systemic racism—institutions of higher education keep structural inequality intact when they leave white supremacist actions and rhetoric unchecked. Committed as a department to fighting racist systems of power and thought, we pledge in our classrooms and professional lives to take specific steps to continue to educate ourselves and enact a number of changes that support students of color on campus and across the United States.

- We will formally change our name to “The Department of French and Francophone Studies,” a long overdue recognition that our discipline is not a national or patriotic endeavor, but an expansive, decentered, and inclusive study of French-language, culture, and literature as it exists on different continents and in heterogeneous contexts.
- We will draw from the questions formulated by the Wellesley 4 Black students to organize discussions regarding our current departmental pedagogical practices and climate. We will continue to analyze the narratives we teach and the canons from which we draw so that we can present to our students a decolonized and nuanced understanding of the francophone world.
- We will organize a series of colloquia in the fall of 2020 on race, anti-Black racism, and racial equity in French Studies. Our purpose is to better engage with France’s history of racialized violence, which includes early participation in the slave trade and wide-ranging colonialism, practices that went hand in hand with the advancement of ideas of white supremacy. We will continue to question the long-accepted ideals of French universalism, which has historically had two major blind spots, the rights of women and those of colonized peoples. Today, not only can the term “universalism” mask underlying inequalities in French society; it can also reinforce those inequalities.

The department hopes that students and faculty members will participate in our conversations about racial equity and inequality—conversations that will inspire more robust inclusive teaching practices in the classroom. Conversations it has never been more urgent to foster.

