

16 June 2020

Many students and colleagues at KU are greatly affected by recent events. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery as well as countless others plus the impact of the coronavirus that have laid bare – again – the injustices and shortcomings of our system, reminding us that people of color are not safe jogging, birdwatching or sleeping in their own homes. How many times does history have to repeat itself? During the protests, thousands have voiced their frustration, anger, sadness, and disappointment. But what the mobilization against police brutality in the US and elsewhere shows us is that there is courage, hope, and the determination to change things. The Department of French, Francophone & Italian Studies acknowledges and supports the demands of the protesters to end anti-black racism and systemic injustice in its various forms.

The global outrage following George Floyd's death has reignited similar debates in many countries, including those represented by the languages in our department: Canada, Belgium, France, Italy, Senegal, Tunisia, and others. Between the 6th and the 7th of June, peaceful protests and flash mobs in support of the BLM movement gathered thousands of people in the piazzas of Bologna, Milan, Rome and Turin, all over Italy. Several thousand people gathered in cities across France, including Paris, to protest and demand justice for Adama Traoré, a young black man who, like Floyd, died while in police custody in 2016. In France, black people are 11.5 times more likely to be stopped by police for identity checks than whites, and those of Arab origin seven times more likely. In his powerful song "Lettre à la république" [Letter to the Republic] Kery James addresses these issues related to discrimination and racism in France.¹ He is not the only one. Ladj Ly's film *Les Misérables* is another recent example.

In her recently published "Lettre adressée à mes amis blancs qui ne voient pas où est le problème," [Letter addressed to my white friends who do not see the problem] French author Virginie Despentes writes: "Car le privilège, c'est avoir le choix d'y penser, ou pas. Je ne peux pas oublier que je suis une femme. Mais je peux oublier que je suis blanche. Ça, c'est être blanche. Y penser, ou ne pas y penser, selon l'humeur. [J]e ne connais pas une seule personne noire ou arabe qui ait ce choix."² Those of us who have been benefiting from white privilege need to listen, speak up, support, and, most importantly, act alongside those who experience racism, marginalization, and police violence. Haitian-Canadian

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gp3XZDK7Lw4>

² <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/lettres-d-interieur/lettres-d-interieur-04-juin-2020>

writer Dany Laferrière emphasized in an interview, that “*pour extirper le racisme dans une société [...], il faut interpeller surtout ceux qui n'en souffrent pas*”.

As language and culture educators, we strive to instill in our students the respect for others who do not look, speak, think or act like us. Reading and discussing fundamental texts such as Montaigne's *Des Cannibales*, Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance*, Camus' *L'Homme révolté* and, more importantly, Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* or Maalouf's *Identités meurtrières* as well as the novels by Maryse Condé, Leonora Miano, Igiaba Scego and Amara Lakhous allows us to teach our students to value the differences in people of all cultures, races, and religions. Let's take these texts to heart and decide to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Let us challenge each other. Talk to your students, talk to your peers and friends, to your administrators, and do your part. This is not the moment to remain passive, because “in a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be antiracist” (Angela Davis). In solidarity!

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