**An Open Letter to the Williams College English Department**

**Or, Uncomfortable Learning at Williams**

To Whom It May Concern and to Those Who Think It Doesn’t:

We are writing to you today to describe some of our experiences as English students at this College, specifically as women of color. We’ve noticed some similar trends among our experiences in the department across our different trajectories through the program in English here. It seems best to talk to you directly, as our professors, our mentors, and our counselors. We’ve already talked about these encounters with some of you, but after a recent surge in such incidents, we felt it was time to bring our concerns to the department as a whole. We do not present this account as an open question, or as a collective journal entry, but rather as a reflection on the growing number of incidents that the department routinely dismisses and suppresses.

We have found ourselves in your classrooms, your offices, your homes, your lectures, being asked to engage only in ways of reading that – whatever their tangential or direct claims to feminism or anti-racism – expect we will eventually yield the stance of critique. **It is no longer cutting edge or radical to merely mention race or gender in class.** Talking about race and gender without an underlying understanding of the ways that these issues inflect the classroom at the very moment of their verbalization is not anti-racist or feminist work. The particulars of sexual or racial violence are not only textual details but also the lived experiences of the students that sit right before you. So when you throw around racial epithets casually, or joke about PTSD and gang-rape, you create an academic environment that dissuades us from speaking.

Moreover, what is (in the best case scenario) a non-committal feminism and anti-racism in your classroom only reinforces for other students the idea that classroom conversation is automatically egalitarian, representative. **Deploying the language of these frameworks to scandalize, titillate, or placate students is disrespectful to the vocabulary of struggles against oppression**. In truth your terms of engagement require us never to contest your racist or misogynist teaching practices. When we do object, you often suppress those critiques by suggesting they are necessarily subjective and not critically rigorous, that we are guilty of poor scholarship. You think we are “getting offended” by the material and not the method. At best, you tell us you are sorry and then do the same thing, again and again.

*“You misunderstand. ‘Sweetheart’ isn’t a diminutive, it’s a gesture of solidarity. I call my male students ‘brother’ because that word’s been deracialized, whereas ‘sister’ hasn’t.*

*Sweetheart, sweetie, dear...  I say these things because I respect you.“*

We understand all too well how our grievances have been explained as our own misunderstanding. We understand too that there can be a gap between what you intended to do and what you’ve done. But this is a department populated by professors who ask us to re-read their behavior as well-intentioned or well-thought out pedagogical strategies. **You tell us that we have misinterpreted, misrepresented what you have taught, even as you willfully misunderstand and misquote our criticisms.**

This is not about offense. But it is convenient to say that it is. You are already in the habit of shifting over to language of offense and insensitivity; you say, “I’m sorry if anyone was offended,” but rarely are you sorry for what you did. You address us as though the issue at hand is our emotional reaction rather than your behavior. You insinuate that the real problem is our sensitivity, imagining in us some naive desire to be “protected” from harsh “realities.”

In a class hailed as a cornerstone of the department: *“It’s shocking and comical –*

*see here’s this hooker being intelligent and educated and well-spoken,*

*and it’s supposed to be a comical moment because what prostitute can talk like this?”*

**We are not arguing for a policed classroom. We are not trying to police your classrooms.** We are demanding that you examine and then dismantle the academic environments you’ve created or allowed to be made. The existing discussion spaces are not just hostile but also uninteresting – you too often frame material such that we can’t address sexual or racial violence in meaningful and ethical ways.  When you pretend that we are trying to police you, that we are the ones who set the agendas for discussion, it only distracts yourself and your students from the truth: **you are the ones who wield power in the classroom. You police what can be said and who can speak**.

Respect for your students and critical thinking are not at odds with each other. **Again, this is not about language; this is not about offense; this is about the actual intellectual work being passed off as legitimate.** This is not only a pedagogical problem, but an ethical failing of the department to approach its students as complex learners, thinkers, and people. You make the work that we want to do impossible by encroaching on our physical space, by looming over us, by throwing off our criticisms and simultaneously retreating into the comfort of your authority.

By centering interpretive authority outside our grasp, you make classroom conversation contingent on relegating our insights to the periphery of analysis. Our readings are treated as detours from the real work of interpretation, interrupting the flow of analysis with personal rather than academic concerns. **You may have us speak, but only when called upon to add the “complication.”**  Though you might graciously allow us to put forward other readings that contest your own, ours is never the first or most legitimate. Our analyses can only be after, only secondary, only in response to; they cannot set (or reset) the terms of engagement.

At my professor’s house: *“I mean it’s funny, right? Acapella rapists, can you imagine?*

*Them going,* ‘Hold her down*.’ ”*

It is not a failure on our part when we disappear from your classrooms, or fall silent. It is not simply out of cowardice that your students choose not to engage you, to challenge you in or after class; in fact your students are often most political and prescient when they choose not to do so. But we refuse to be forced out of our classrooms by misogyny and racism any longer.

Pedagogy in this department needs to change. Accountability in this department certainly needs to change – and not through bureaucratic or administrative channels, or out of a defensive maneuver to look liberal and innocent, but out of sustained consideration of the classroom environments you create. Exactly how many English majors are women of color? How many thesis students? How many of us are present, but silent, in your classes? Are there enough of us to make you feel diverse? Does it count even when we don’t speak?

*“If you can’t handle it, you shouldn’t be here. … Maybe you shouldn’t be here.*

*Maybe you shouldn’t have taken this class.”*

These incidents, passed off as your unremarkable oddities or endearing quirks are far from benign; if they are on one hand just professorial eccentricities, then they are on the other also a pattern of behaviors that together form a remarkably coherent whole. Ours is a department that has addressed issues of race and gender only under political duress. **The** **pedagogy we have observed and been taught betrays the way that race and gender are often just compulsory intrusions into your classroom.** You are not now, nor have you ever been, on the cutting edge; your politics have too often been reactionary instead of revolutionary.Our experiences and our readings of those experiences are systemically and systematically forgotten. No one is accountable for our absence or our silence.

Race, gender, sexuality, and other axes of “identity” critique are not marginal modes of analysis. And we, the women and people of color, are not marginal in your department.

**You cannot afford to ignore the problems festering in your department, in your classrooms, and in your colleagues’ classrooms.** And we cannot afford to have our silence interpreted as consent to the department’s policies and practices. Professors reflect what the department makes possible for them to say or do in the classroom, just as students reflect the direction of discourse for which the professor clears space. Additionally, your responsibilities are not limited to your own classrooms – you are accountable to each other as a department.

We have spent far too long dismissing the ways that our experiences here have over time pushed us out and silenced our discomfort. We will not allow our reactions to the department to be understood as anything other than a protest of its pedagogy and, specifically, its sublimated misogyny and racism.

We cannot afford to co-sign this department’s commitment to a pedagogy that continually dismisses our work and our experiences in a way that creates actively hostile educational environments for us. The only people who have a vested interest in testifying to their experiences are people who are actively silenced by either the mode of discourse or the language being thrown around. We can never accumulate sufficient proof to speak in a system built to deny our testimony audience.

Please don’t misunderstand. We have great admiration and affection for many of you, even when you continue to deny our critiques’ validity, and even when you intimidate or trouble us. Many of you are good educators and challenging mentors. But this letter applies to all of you, even and especially those professors who think of themselves as liberal, radical, or liberational.

You are pushing us out of our classrooms.

Signed,

Anonymous

Diana Chen

Tony Wei Ling