



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712

Department of English

22 May 1973

Professor W. R. Keast, Chairman
Department of English

Professor Keast:

I enclose a copy of my memo to the department (undated, unfortunately; written Friday, May 18) on the tangled subject of the department minutes and Black literature. I would like to comment upon my memo and upon Mr. Bowden's letter to Mr. Raymond (dated May 20), a copy of which, I believe, was sent to you and which I will quote from below.

Although Mr. Bowden has set right the distortion of his remarks to the department as recorded in the minutes, his emanation does little to alleviate my concern with his position. The substantive issue is whether the department considers it proper to offer a course or courses in exclusively Black literature. Mr. Bowden, as Chairman of the Undergraduate Course Committee, lets it be known what his sentiments are as clearly by the phrase "belong to the past" as by the word "vogue."

Let me say at once that, in my opinion, Mr. Bowden's caution with respect to a "program of courses" (a phrase which appears in his letter but not in the minutes) in Black literature is justifiable, and his insistence upon a "serious and thoughtful integration of Black literature into the larger category of American literature" is commendable. But Mr. Bowden seems to view the latter concession exclusively in the light of prevailing social conflicts--"that battle being won"--rather than as a logical (if overdue) extension of the traditional academic processes of inquiry and pedagogy. More seriously, Mr. Bowden suggests that since there might be "integration of Black literature" in future American literature courses (specifically, survey courses), it logically follows that the department should not seek and should not sanction courses which treat Black literature exclusively. This non sequitur must be questioned; there is a point beyond which caution becomes censorship and integration becomes anonymity.

The department certainly has the obligation to evaluate its course offerings with respect to academic (and economic) requirements. But I have little confidence that full consideration has been given to the integrity of Black literature as a field of concentration. Instead, it is treated as a vogue, a temporary social phenomenon, or as a political expedient. Further, I wonder how many of our courses (excepting survey courses) would not fit the category of "belonging to

the past" or could not also be absorbed into a "larger category" of literature?

Though I am speaking for myself, from my particular point of view, I am confident that it is shared by many members of this department, by faculty in the Ethnic Studies program, by scholars in other institutions in the states and abroad, and also by numbers of graduate students and undergraduate students. I would like, therefore, some assurance that the Undergraduate Course Committee and the department as a whole has given full, fair consideration to Black literature course offerings. In my memo to the department, I rhetorically proposed (not without humor, I hope) that Mr. Bowden and I debate the issues, as a means to insure that departmental decisions will be based upon the fullest exercise of evidential evaluation. There are, of course, other, better means at hand. Aside from urging the necessity of further committee and departmental discussion, I would propose that the Undergraduate Course Committee, or a subdivision of it, solicit opinions about the viability of Black literature courses from recognized scholars in the field-- Darwin Turner, Abraham Chapman, Arna Bontemps, Stephen Henderson, James Emanuel, Michel Fabre and Robert Bone, to name a few. Present course offerings at other institutions, such as UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, U. San Diego, Queens College, and so forth, might be looked into; polls might also be conducted to measure student interest, if that were at doubt. I fully expect that such inquiry would establish sufficient grounds for looking upon Black literature as a legitimate academic pursuit for the present--grounds, that is, which would satisfy all but the most cautious members of the department.

I would imagine that every member of the department would at least welcome further investigation and discussion of the issues, and I am certain that scholarship in Black literature would benefit greatly from the clearer atmosphere.

Sincerely,

Malcolm Genet

Malcolm Genet

cc. Mr. Bowden
Mr. Sutherland