University of Michigan faculty open letter supports witch-hunt, rejects letter signed by hundreds defending victimized professor Bright Sheng

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On November 4, 12 professors in the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Arts and Science (LSA) issued an open letter defending the university's campaign against internationally renowned composer and long-time professor Bright Sheng. The open letter has to date been signed by some 170 additional faculty and students.

The letter came in response to an open letter released the previous week and signed by a far larger number of faculty—more than 750—as well as a separate open letter issued by students in the School of Music, Theater and Dance (SMTD) and signed by a total of 60 UM students. Both of these letters issued a strong protest against the removal of Professor Sheng from his freshman composition class and demanded that the university issue a public apology.

The principled faculty and student open letters defending the victimized professor denounced the violation of due process and academic freedom by the dean of SMTD and the administration as a whole.

When a group of students in Sheng's freshman composition class on Giuseppe Verdi's operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* complained about Sheng's showing of the 1965 film version of the play starring Laurence Olivier, on the grounds that Olivier's use of black make-up to portray the Moorish general was "racist," SMTD Dean David Gier quickly sent out an email stating, "Professor Sheng's actions do not align with our school's commitment to anti-racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion."

The November 4 faculty open letter defending the attack on Sheng adopts an aggressive tone. The aim is to intimidate all those who oppose the strictures of racial and identity politics and their enforcement by institutionalized thought police by branding them as "racist." To the extent that the authors of the letter are critical of the university, it is not over its violation of academic freedom and freedom of thought, but rather its failure to enforce the dogmas of so-called "diversity, equity and inclusion" more forcefully.

It begins: "The present situation reflects a failure of university and departmental leadership to develop a protocol for handling racist representations in the classroom and to ensure that faculty have adequate resources and training to develop appropriate pedagogy in relation to race and racist content."

In other words, faculty must be more strictly policed lest they breach the limits of the race- and gender-obsessed politics of the Democratic Party and the academic establishment.

The authors simply assert, without any attempt at substantiation, that the incident which triggered the attack on Sheng was "a racist act." In the space of less than two pages of text, the words "race" or "racist" appear more than a dozen times.

The letter speaks of "invisible" racism. It declares that "An act can be racist without intent, and personal bias is not the issue here." It refers, without further elaboration, to the "systemic nature of racism in higher education."

Perhaps most disgraceful, from an intellectual standpoint, is the failure of the authors to even discuss the play and opera in question. The letter's only specific reference to the Olivier film version of *Othello* is the ignorant characterization of the famous actor's use of black makeup as "blackface." In fact, Olivier chose to use the makeup in a deliberate effort to be true to Shakespeare's play, in which Othello's skin color and the prejudice against it is a central theme, and to counter previous productions that downplayed the racial tensions in the play.

Instead, the letter asserts "the historically entrenched whiteness of opera and classical music," essentially adopting the reactionary position that all of classical music is inherently racist.

How could a course on composition, focusing on Verdi's musical interpretation of one of the greatest plays in history, authored by perhaps the greatest figure in world literature, possibly educate anyone on such a basis?

What is the logic of such a racialist approach? Is Shakespeare's *Othello* racist? Should it be banned? Should the 1965 film be banned? Is it permissible for white people to play black roles, or Asian roles, or for blacks, for that matter, to play characters of different skin colors?

One suspects the authors of the letter, or at least some of them, would protest that they are not calling for the banning of Shakespeare or *Othello*, just that they be properly "contextualized," i.e., smeared as examples of racist "whiteness."

One of the sources cited as part of the "rich body" of literature

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on “entrenched whiteness” in the theater is one of the letter’s authors, Naomi Andre, a professor in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies and in Women’s Studies. Andre played a foul role in the right-wing racialist attack on a landmark 2018 concert performance of George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* at the University of Michigan.

This retrograde and irrationalist approach leads inexorably in the direction of, and plays into the hands of, fascists who promote conceptions of art and culture based on blood, race and nation.

The letter brushes aside the democratic concerns of faculty and students expressed in the previous open letters over the treatment of Sheng and the attack on academic freedom and freedom of thought of which it is a part. It makes the sophistic and absurd claim that the students who denounced Sheng were not “objecting to the content of Sheng’s lecture,” but only his supposed pedagogical failure to provide “any context for the history and harmful nature of blackface.” In this way, he allegedly violated the “safe space” of students who evidently knew little or nothing about either the play or Verdi’s opera.

Therefore, the letter states, “this is not a free speech issue.”

Instead, the letter calls for a more effective and repressive institutionalization of racialist and identity politics. It lists three proposals to combat “invisible racism” and racism “without intent” and achieve “transformational justice.”

First, the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the university should act preemptively “before an incident occurs in the classroom.” It should provide faculty members with “feedback on an apology” and supply a “moderator to help facilitate discussion in the class.”

Second, department chairs should establish protocols to remove a faculty member “in the event that a student reports a racist incident” and replace the accused [and therefore convicted] instructor with someone else to “work the issue out” with the students.

Third, “anti-racism training” must be made mandatory and ongoing for all faculty. The letter declares: “Regular training should also be held throughout a faculty member’s tenure at the university and must be tailored by departments so that faculty develop an awareness of how systemic racism has affected and continues to propagate within their disciplines.”

Faculty and students should ponder the implications of these demands. What kind of police-state climate is being proposed here? Should this agenda prevail, Professor Sheng will be only the first of an ever-growing list of heretics banished for violating racialist orthodoxy, whether with or without intent. In fact, similar witch-hunts are already taking place on campuses across the country.

There is nothing progressive or democratic about this brand of politics, which has become the stock in trade of the Democratic Party. It is anti-socialist and anti-working class.

The faculty letter is clearly orchestrated in a desperate attempt to counter the growing backlash among faculty and students against the attack on Sheng.

After several days of silence, the administration responded on November 3 to the faculty letter defending Sheng with an official statement that was, as the WSWS put it, “ a model of deceit and hypocrisy .” The statement defended its smear campaign against Sheng and rejected calls for him to be returned to his class and given a public apology. It began with the obvious lie that the “University of Michigan strongly supports free speech and academic freedom.”

Of particular concern to the university and the powerful political and corporate interests it serves is the leading role of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality on campus and the WSWS in opposing the attack on Sheng and rallying support for him among faculty and students at UM and among workers, youth and principled academics more broadly.

The IYSSE took the lead by issuing an open letter on October 15 demanding Sheng’s reinstatement and a public apology by the university—demands taken up in the subsequent open letters from faculty and students in Sheng’s defense—and explaining the connection between the witch-hunt and the right-wing, anti-democratic character of racial and identity politics.

The faculty letter supporting the attack on Sheng is part of the effort to intimidate opposition from the left.

The essential purpose of reactionary politics of racial identity is to divide and disorient masses of workers and young people in the US and internationally who are coming into struggle against a system that is incapable of solving any of the life-and-death problems confronting mankind—from the pandemic to the climate crisis. It plays into the hands of racist and far-right forces around Trump who are able to posture obscenely as the upholders of the democratic and progressive legacy of the American Revolution and Civil War. It benefits, besides the ruling oligarchy, privileged and selfish layers of the upper-middle class who seek to use the politics of race and gender to gain position of power and wealth.

Faculty and students must step up the defense of Professor Sheng and demand the dismantling of the entire apparatus of intimidation and repression that has been erected to enforce racialist and identity politics.

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