**Diversity NOW: On the Importance of Centering Diversity in Education**

**for a Less Divisive and Safer Future**

Hello Everyone. My name is Khani Begum and I am an Associate Professor in the English Department at BGSU, where I teach a variety of Literature and film courses. I would like to thank Prof. Cordula Mora for inviting me to give the keynote for the 2021 Undergraduate Research Symposium on Diversity, and thanks also to Matt De Amon for helping with the technical issues to get this talk online. The title of my talk is "Diversity NOW: The Importance of Centering Diversity in Education for a Less Divisive and Safer Future."

Why is diversity and inclusion important?

Our culture, race, place of origin, class, and our bodies all determine how each of us experiences the world around us and our experiences shape our identity and behavior. The places we have lived, the language/s we have spoken, the songs we have sung, the books we have read all inform and influence who we become. Understanding diversity of experiences of others leads us to recognize and respect each other as equal human beings with unique cultural, religious, and ethnic life experiences. Through this understanding we are able to see others as equals and hence are able to empathize with them. Getting to know people of different diverse cultures also enhances our own lives by exposing us to new life experiences, new ways of thinking and doing things. It also allows us to understand how others see us and helps dispel negative stereotypes and personal biases about different groups, races, ethnicities, abilities, religions, and sexualities. In essence, cultural diversity helps us recognize and respect “ways of being” that are not necessarily our own.

When speaking about diversity we need to be clear that it is also a type of literacy and is tied to global and cultural literacy. Global and cultural literacy may not have been a high priority in most North American High School and even College course curriculums in the past, but the landscape has been changing rapidly as educational institutions, aware of migratory movements across continents, changing demographics within the United States, and our constantly expanding world, are adapting to meet new challenges through revised curriculums and innovative educational strategies. Many curriculums now include works from and by other cultures and countries in core literature courses, while others with mission statements promoting global cultural literacy and diversity include in required and area tracks new courses in their disciplines from multicultural, world, global, transnational, and diaspora perspectives. The more the world expands the closer people get as travel, the Internet, and economic and business partnerships make distances between places irrelevant. In the 21st century, knowledge about other cultures and people with different life experiences broadens understanding, creates empathy, and connects us with others.

 Drexel University's School of Education page points out that cultural diversity in their classrooms has been on the rise and that public schools hit a minority majority milestone with Latino, African American, and Asian students surpassing the number of white students. They see this as a trend that will continue especially since the prediction by the US Census is that by 2044 over half the nation's population will be people of color. (*Drexel University School of Education).* Recognizing how diversity both in and out of the classroom continues to grow, schools and universities across the country, including BGSU, are well aware of the need to prepare students for these demographic changes and to teach them how to adapt to a more diverse and changing world. The purpose and mission of many Education programs across the country engaged in pursuing diversity is to help prepare more culturally responsible world individuals who can embrace those different from themselves and be able to work productively with different groups of people.

Our schools and universities are the places where we learn not just content material in the disciplines in which our careers will be built, but also how to function in the world, interact with others, collaborate and build a better future for ourselves, our communities, and the next generation. Often our first encounter with diverse populations or with diverse ideas and perspectives may only occur when we first enter the university. If that university values diversity literacy and diversity exists there in some shape or form or is taught through diversified curriculums that take into account diverse perspectives and ideas, then students will be prepared to face the future and more likely to succeed.

When we look to see what changes have been made in the last two or three decades to further diversity initiatives in education, we find that we have come a long way in advancing diversity in educational systems

1. Through Curriculum development where curriculums now include diverse material and perspectives.
2. By including unrepresented voices in all fields of study through new hires of scholars from different backgrounds and perspectives,
3. By creating lecture series and programs that bring innovative and diverse scholars to the campus.
4. Developing strategies for recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds and racial and ethnic groups
5. Creation of entire departments and/or degree programs that focus on diversity and inclusion education.

We do need to be aware that this is still a work in progress and we are in the early stages of understanding the importance of diversity and how it can best be achieved. There is still a lot more work to be done.

BGSU is among the many universities across the United States to have consciously promoted a number of similar initiatives to advance diversity on campus. We now have a Division of Diversity and Belonging with Jennifer Carey as our Chief Diversity and Belonging Officer and Chair of the Diversity and Belonging Council. The membership of this council consists of many faculty and administrators whose areas and interests coincide with diversity issues from several directions. This Division has also drafted a strategic plan and a Diversity Statement. Here is the BGSU Diversity Statement Affirming Diversity and Belonging to be found on the Webpage of the Office of Diversity and Belonging:

BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY STATEMENT

AFFIRMING DIVERSITY AND BELONGING

Bowling Green State University values diversity as essential to improving the human condition. Diversity and inclusion immeasurably enriches all that we do to engage, understand, and respect individuals. Within our community, the diversity of identities and life experiences determines how we perceive and contribute to society. We acknowledge that diversity has not always been understood or embraced in our society, yet, at BGSU, we will strive to understand and embrace diversity by breaking down barriers to meaningful participation to ensure that individuals are treated with dignity. As a community, we commit to advance this culture through a comprehensive strategy and diversity plan that focuses on the recruitment, retention, and success of a diverse student body, faculty, staff, and administration. As a public university for the public good, our bedrock commitment to diversity and belonging requires mutual respect, understanding, and valuing individuals to facilitate a more diverse and inclusive environment so all can belong.

Much has happened in our country this pandemic year in addition to the continuance of a once in a century worldwide Pandemic. The unexpected outcome of the Pandemic for many of us has been that it has given us time to reflect on what is most important in our lives and why. Some of the events of the last year have highlighted the divide in this country between different groups of people. Not everyone is willing to embrace diversity because they cannot recognize its importance and need in their individual lives or feel threatened by it in some way.

Understanding the role of diversity in our lives is more crucial now because we have reached a new level at which we are tolerating intolerance. During the past year, despite the progress made, there have been some major set-backs indicating that intolerance is on the rise even as (and possibly because) diversity too is on the rise as I mentioned earlier. While the year 2020 will be marked historically for the global pandemic of COVID 19, the pain, hurt, and loss suffered due to this virus is exacerbated by events of the past year starting with increased police shootings of African American men like the killing of George Floyd that sparked a summer of Black Lives Matter protests across the country and worldwide, rivaling the Civil Rights marches of the 1960s. The response by local police and armed National Guard contingents to these protests was swift and prompt in many cities and resulted in violent clashes and imprisonment of protestors. *The Associated Press* and *The Guardian* reported that over summer 2020 more than 10,000 people were arrested, most of them non-violent. (**"**AP tally: Arrests at widespread US protests hit 10,000**"** by Anita Snow *The* *Associated Press* June 4, 2020 and "'They Set us Up': US Police Arrested over 10,000 protestors, many non-violent" by Michael Sainato, *The Guardian* June 8, 2020).

Since the beginning of this new year, three- significant events, that could likely change the trajectory of this country's future, have taken place—

**one**, the January 6th insurrection and attack on our Capital Building;

**two,** what followed two weeks later: the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States;

**three:** the recent killing spree in Atlanta Georgia that took 8 lives and is now deemed a hate crime against Asian Americans.

While January 6th events instilled a chilling sense of shock, fear, sadness, anger, and depression in that order, two weeks later, the inauguration speeches and performances managed to raise our spirits as speakers and performers raised their voices in poetry and song with hope. While basking in the afterglow of the diversity of these performances, I was still confused by this tumultuous first month of 2021 that seemed to be topping off more than a year of Pandemic fatigue along with the BLM protests.

The events of January 6, 2021, now described as acts of domestic terrorism, were unprecedented and shocking especially when it began to be reported that some White Supremacist hate groups were behind the insurrectionist attack on the Capital Building and were attempting to kill ‘democracy.’ It was shocking to witness on Television the anger and rage expressed by some of the participants who came with intent to harm those inside the Capital Building. Viewing the actual assaults on the Capitol Police, and to realize that by the end of it all 5 people were dead and 140 injured was truly disturbing. While this was an extreme example of intolerance it shows how quickly misunderstanding and distrust between fellow citizens can so easily lead to devastating consequences. It highlights even more than ever the importance and urgent need for more thoughtful ways of enhancing diversity in education and promoting global and cultural literacy.

The unrest and racial divisions unveiled during these events did not end there, for barely two months later on March 16, 2021 a lone white gunman rampaged through Atlanta, Georgia picking out three Asian Spas across the city killing eight people, six of them being Asian women. Once the suspect was apprehended ‘without incident’ (as most white suspects are), the Spokesperson for the Cherokee County Sheriff’s office in responding to media questions, said

the suspect does claim that it was not racially motivated. He apparently has an issue, what he considers a sex addiction, and sees these locations as something that allows him to go to these places, and it’s a temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate. And he was pretty much fed up and had been kind of at the end of his rope and this was a really bad day for him and this is what he did.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JkTc3TL6Go>

Reactions to this report from many organizations and lawmakers have been strong, especially from Asian American groups working to fight against discrimination and hate crimes against AAPIs (Asian American and Pacific Islanders) such as CAA (Chinese for Affirmative Action) among other anti-hate groups around the country. What is more disturbing about this explanation of what clearly is a targeted hate crime against women of a particular ethnicity and culture, is that such a crime has been feared among the AAIP community as a definite possibility since the pandemic began and they noted a rise in crimes against their community. Asian Americans have been reporting hate crimes (as of this writing NBC and other news outlets have reported 3800 incidents of anti-Asian attacks in the past year) and have been calling out for concerted action all year, but little notice has been taken and in many instances these have not been prosecuted as hate crimes. Anti-Asian hate crimes have spiked 150% in the last year with the targets being particularly Asian women and the elderly. Many have led to the death of those attacked while out grocery shopping, walking on city streets, or using the Subway. The reason for this spike is clear. The rhetoric about COVID 19 being referred to as the “China Virus” or the Wuhan Flu” has created an atmosphere of fear and hate towards China and people of Chinese descent and placed a target on the backs of all Asians. This is not, however, a problem confined to the United States. In a report issued by the *Human Rights Watch* on May 12, 2020, the organization, putting forward action plans to counteract the rise in anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia worldwide, calls out the rhetoric of many governments against China and Asians during the COVID 19 crisis holding them responsible for the rise in anti-Asian racism and Xenophobia :

Government leaders and senior officials in some instances have directly or indirectly encouraged hate crimes, racism, or xenophobia by using anti-Chinese rhetoric. Several political parties and groups, including in the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece, France, and Germany have also latched onto the Covid-19 crisis to advance anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultra-nationalist, anti-semitic, and xenophobic conspiracy theories that demonize refugees, foreigners, prominent individuals, and political leaders. (“COVID 19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide: National Action Plans Needed to Counteract Intolerance” *Human Rights Watch Report* May 12, 2020):

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>

 Under these circumstances and these times, we can understand how significantly vital it is for all to embrace global and cultural literacy and foster appreciation of the diversity of cultures and peoples in order to develop empathy for others.

In her acceptance speech upon receiving the Cecil B. DeMille lifetime award at the 2021 Golden Globes, Jane Fonda, two-time Academy Award winner and activist, makes an impassioned plea for the power stories have in raising consciousness about inequities and for helping us be less divided. Addressing her Hollywood community as "storytellers," she speaks to the importance of storytelling in "turbulent, crisis-torn times" such as ours:

. . . stories can change our hearts and our minds. They can help us see each other in a new light. To have empathy. To recognize that, for all our diversity, we are humans first, right? . . . Because the nonlinear, non-cerebral forms that are art speak on a different frequency. They generate a new energy that can jolt us open and penetrate our defenses so that we can see and hear what we may have been afraid of seeing and hearing.

 (<https://ew.com/awards/golden-globes/jane-fonda-cecil-b-demille-speech/>

The emphasis on the importance of the diversity of stories was also a running theme in the performances at the January 20th inauguration, which gives me hope that we have made progress with diversity and inclusion education despite some setbacks. Among the many vocal and other performances the one that spoke powerfully for our moment of history was the recitation by Amanda Gorman of her poem “The Hill We Climb.” I’ll end my talk here and play the video of her recitation that inspires us all and confirms the role of diversity in our future.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Amanda Gorman: The Hill We Climb” January 20, 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ055ilIiN4>