



**Oregon State
University**

**School of Writing, Literature,
and Film**

Oregon State University
238 Moreland Hall
Corvallis, Oregon 97331

P 541-737-3244
F 541-737-3589
liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf

November 8, 2024

Dear Tim Jensen,

For the purpose of a peer evaluation of classroom teaching, I visited Marcos Norris' ENG 221 African American Literature course on Wednesday Nov. 6th 2024. Marcos provided me a copy of his syllabus for this class prior to my visit so I could understand how the class period I observed fit into his progressive lesson plans for the term. My admiration of Marcos' pedagogy indeed began with reading this syllabus. After his inclusion of the CLA statement on DEI, I found a page entitled "Content Note," in which Marcos explains to his student the difficulties inherent in reading and confronting the literature in the course and offers his a trigger warning by stating that "the readings will be intellectually challenging and emotionally difficult at times," and thus "if the topics listed about are too difficult for you to read about and discuss in a group setting, I recommend not taking this class." He follows this with a break down of the tenets of free academic expression and inquiry with a list that defines such ideas as Open Inquiry, Viewpoint Diversity, and Constructive Disagreement. I found this statement about how to participate in a learning environment to be essential; it tasks students think critically about their own perspective, to attempt to understand others patiently and carefully, and to be able to conduct a rational conversation about their differences. This was one of most refreshing and important of such statements that I've read in syllabi throughout my career. Added to this was Marcos' choices for the course of primary and secondary texts to be studied, which was well balanced in terms of novels, dramas, poems and political and sociological essay from both black and white thinkers on race. These ranged from the 19th century racist theories, to a study of the film *The Jazz Singer*, to the writings of Du Bois and Alain Locke, to classic fictional works of the Harlem Renaissance by James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larson, to the writing of Marcus Garvey to the present arguments of Ibram X. Kendi and Colman Hughes. In all, one of the most balanced selections of mandatory works I've seen in an introductory class on African American Literature. Marcos employs a variety of graded writing assignments through which he evaluates his students' learning process including running discussion boards and argumentative 3 page reaction papers spread out over the course of the term.

The class I observed was predominately one in which Marcos had designed and implemented a productive group exercise to allow the students to further engage with their last reading assignment of excerpted material from Kendi's *How to be an Anti-Racist* and Hughes' *The End of Race Politics*. In the prior class to this one, students had been asked to read and discuss a selections of writings on racism and black futurity form the Renaissance era, including those of George Schuyler, Langston Hughes, Garvey, Du Bois, and Locke. This prior assignment eventually became in the closing movement of our day's lessons the key context through which the students were asked to understand the contemporary writings. Although the student had read the excerpts prior to the class, Marcos reintroduced both writers and explained the divide they represented in terms of current ideas about

racism in America as it pertains to the African American community and their unique history; here Marcos' presentation was clear, organized, and precise, and worked to frame both thinkers' positions, as well as their relations to present academic orthodoxies such as Critical Race Theory or the Reparations Movement. After this, Marcos showed video clips of Kendi speaking in front of an audience and one of Hughes from a Zoom blog discussion. Combined, the clips took up the first 25 minutes of class time. When these were over, Marcos again articulated the foundational concepts from both speaker's work, and then broke the students up into eight small groups and asked them to go back to their readings (PDFs on Canvas) and take written notes on how they each felt about the validity or importance of both pieces. After this, he combined the groups into 4 larger groups and asked first the even numbered folks to explain what they had written to the group and then the odd number students to do the same. During this period he sat with each group progressively, listened to their ongoing discussion, and occasionally offered missing details or re-explanations of misunderstandings any student might have made in their presentation. Listening intermittently to each group, I overheard some of the most balanced, careful, and well thought-out discussions about the present state of racism, race relations, and the two thinkers in questions than I have ever been privy to from undergraduates students—and I attributed the level of civil discourse to Marcos' group lesson, which I later discovered he had employed in several class meetings previously. When he asked for the conversations to wind down, he once again stood before the class and presented a cogent conclusion based on asking the students about, and then laying out for them, parallels and differences they might see between the earlier era of black thinkers and these two contemporary theorist on race and racism.

In his careful yet animated speaking style, Marcos is a commanding presence in the classroom--but not as pedantic lecturer or adversarial critic of student thought and opinion; rather, he is careful, calm, and thought-provoking in how he lays out the details and redelivers the concepts that students will be challenged with during that class meeting. I found this combination of well-paced, clarifying explanation and well-planned group work, in which the students could speak directly to each other about their thoughts on racism, to be one of the most productive pedagogies and personal classroom styles I've seen in a long time and across all levels of our faculty. Given the opportunity to view his syllabus and witness his classroom teaching, my conclusions about the quality of Marcos Norris work for our School is that he is one of the most important types of teachers we are privileged to have as our colleague. He is an educator in the classic meaning of the term: one who challenges his students with complex readings that represent a judicious selection form the course's given topic, and then asks them to employ rigorous methodologies of reflection and conclusion about what they've encountered thematically in each piece. He is not only teaching them material in an open manner without bias, but he is also pushing them to think critically about what they've read. In my opinion, there can be no more valuable type of professional educator in the humanities.

Respectfully Submitted,
Professor Neil R. Davison