



UNIVERSITY of
DENVER

COLLEGE OF ARTS, HUMANITIES
& SOCIAL SCIENCES
Spanish Language,
Literary & Cultural Studies

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Open Letter in Support of NSA and RAHR

The Department of Spanish Language, Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Denver and its members signing this letter, join together with many other departments and colleagues at the University of Denver, as well as other institutions in Colorado and beyond, in support of the demands made by the Native Students Alliance (NSA) and Righteous Anger! Healing Resistance! (RAHR) for the removal of the moniker “Pioneer.”

As the Indigenous faculty have pointed out in their own letter of support to the NSA, we are not talking about communities with equal stakes in the removal of this symbol, and to assume that there are ‘very fine’ arguments on both sides of this issue does not bear scrutiny when we acknowledge our shared context of the dispossession of land that indigenous people suffered during the pioneers’ settling of our nation and of the state of Colorado.

We believe that the intended uplifting, unifying, and community-building functions of a moniker are similar to those tied to the erecting of monuments; these symbols, embraced and propagated by choice from a position of power, attach a supplemental meaning to a given institution that should bear scrutiny. Though the university’s moniker is not a physical monument erected on campus, it does evoke and memorialize a set of values with which to identify. As with monuments, the “Pioneer” moniker operates as a function of a collective choice; it is an expression of the values and aspirations of the community that first embraced the image as a symbol of the university. Unfortunately, the settler-colonial roots of that image cannot be erased simply by pretending they are not part of the story that “Pioneer” tells, which is why the persistent use of “Pioneer” will only continue to manifest this community’s acquiescence—or even celebration—of the violence that is foundational to the history of Colorado and the University of Denver. Like monuments, monikers tell more about the people who erected them than they do about the past they commemorate. And as with monuments, monikers similarly tell us more about the people who continue to celebrate them in the present than they do about the problematic past that they are celebrating.

Chancellor Jeremy Haefner has proposed that as a campus community, we focus only on the positive aspects of the word “pioneer,” dismissing the history of the word not only in the national context, but specifically in relation to the pioneers’ incursions into the lands that were occupied by the Ute, Arapaho and Cheyenne Nations. We reject this proposition and adhere to the linguistic and rhetorical reasoning of the English department, which has pointed out that language does not work that way. One cannot

unilaterally ignore a word's origins and history. "In short" -they wrote-, "you cannot simply pick and choose your semantics."¹

In the same vein, we believe that this desire to retain a divisive symbol must be questioned, because it asks the entire DU community (people of color and others), to identify with the pioneer narrative of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. Arguments in favor of retention of the Pioneer moniker implicitly (or even explicitly) claim that our focus should remain on ahistorical notions of resilience and courage, which ignore painful and violent historical references and concomitantly allow, and indeed encourage, the preservation of a narrative of "the frontier" for all of those who wish to extoll the ideology of "virtues of progress" through violent dispossession and displacement.

We believe that words are attached to history and geography, memory and power, and that it is not possible to have it both ways. We cannot pretend to be part of the *winners* and, at the same time, purport to honor the Native American and indigenous communities and individuals at the University of Denver, within our community partnerships, and beyond.

We, the Department of Spanish Language, Literary & Cultural Studies, believe that as a whole, the University of Denver should search for another, more inclusive "We," a symbol free of the historical baggage that makes the Pioneer moniker a painful and divisive, as well as a racialized term.

We would like to close by sharing two remarks from the Introduction to the book, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* by Cynthia Prescott, Associate Professor of History at the University of North Dakota, who researches and writes about Pioneer commemorations, arguing that these statues still represent a racist view, ignoring the cost of white settlement on Native lands. Like earlier monuments, they reinforce ideologies of white dominance and erase ethnic diversity in the American West:

"Pioneer commemoration ignores the conquest of indigenous peoples, the meeting of diverse cultures in the region, and women as agents rather than just symbols of white civilization. Western communities erected pioneer monuments to claim their own place within the project of national expansion, and to grapple with collective guilt over the conquest of indigenous peoples".

"These monuments hold white settlers -and particularly pioneer mothers- up as the embodiment of national ideas of freedom, democracy and individualism. They offer white nuclear families as symbols of the American nation. And they define Americanism as the embodiment of westward expansion, even as they exclude and erase indigenes and other peoples of color".

We, the undersigned, join our colleagues and students from across the university in calling on the university to recognize that the time has come to abandon this symbol and moniker, reminiscent of a past of which we are not proud. We sincerely hope that Chancellor Jeremy Haefner will reconsider his decision.

Respectfully submitted,

Salvador Mercado, Chair

¹ Letter on support to remove the "Pioneer" moniker from the University of Denver, October 30, 2020.

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