

**Statement on Equity and Justice**  
**Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature**  
posted and approved June 22, 2020

After police killed George Floyd in Minneapolis and protests erupted nationwide, we at SSML have been listening to the voices of equity sounding out across the country. We have been especially attentive to problems in academia, and the conversations surrounding #BlackintheIvory and #PublishingPaidMe have helped us to assess what changes we can make within SSML to ensure that we equitably support diverse scholarship and creative writing in our organization and throughout the Midwest. We hope not to offer empty words but a commitment and a plan on how we can improve our processes and activities to elevate and embrace diversity.

We are an organization dedicated to studying the American Midwest in “whatever direction the insight, imagination, and curiosity of its members may lead,” and we have always viewed that mission as inclusive of all voices in the Midwest. Yet, the Midwest is often stereotyped as rural, white, and conservative. We must acknowledge that those simplistic stories, reflective of settler colonial history and told as a version of “Midwest Nice,” can obscure the region’s dynamism, and they paper over its horrific history of violence and oppression against people of color. George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are, unfortunately, part of a long list of Midwestern Black, Native American, Latinx, Asian American, and LGBTQ voices who have been denied their right to live and flourish due to systemic racism and other forms of oppression. We mourn their loss and want to participate more actively to deconstruct the systems that enable such violence and inhumanity.

In much of our work, we have tried to elevate and embrace the diversity of voices in the Midwest. We have consistently published articles on diverse writers in our journals, and one of our notable contributions has been to highlight the work of African American, Asian American, Arab American, Latino/a American, and Native American writers in *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, Volume 2. However, while we have always been committed in theory to recognizing that the Midwest is not just a white space, we have not always demonstrated that in practice:

- Only 16% of the winners of our Mark Twain Award for Distinguished Contributions to Midwestern Literature have been people of color. That clearly underestimates the diversity of literature produced and written in the Midwest, and the number of major writers associated with the region who are people of color. We commit to recognizing more diverse voices going forward.
- Fewer than 5% of the winners of our MidAmerica Award for Distinguished Contributions to Midwestern Literary Scholarship have been people of color. That is a significant lack of recognition on our part of the vital and necessary work that so many scholars are doing in increasing our understanding of often underrepresented aspects of Midwestern literature and culture. While our 2021 awardee has already been selected, it is essential for SSML to recognize scholars of color with the MidAmerica Award.
- We have always looked to partner with other organizations to broaden our perspectives and representation. We will continue to do so, with more emphasis on collaborations that challenge and complicate the dominant racial and ethnic stereotypes about Midwestern

literature and culture. We will also seek to establish ties with centers, departments, and programs for African American, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American studies around the country.

- We will publish our CFPs in scholarly journals in ethnic literature, noting specific examples of writers of color and literary movements associated with the Midwest.
- We will not wait for scholars of color to express interest in SSML. We will identify scholars working on Midwestern literary subjects so that the Society president may personally and officially invite them to attend our annual Symposium, informing them of opportunities to publish, participate in governance and editorial work, and win awards. We will increase this effort starting with our 2021 Symposium.
- We will continue to seek out and solicit contributions from graduate students of color as we contemplate submissions for our annual symposium, our publications, and our annual writing award and prizes. Our Joseph Wydeven Scholarships to offset student travel and attendance expenses to attend our symposium can aid in this effort.

While SSML has long professed to value diversity, we have not done enough to ensure that it is actually represented in our organization. We have been working to address this issue, but we must make it a Society priority, accelerating our efforts to make the organization more racially diverse in membership and leadership. SSML should represent the diverse reality that is the American Midwest, and we commit to foregrounding that vision as we move forward.