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CCCC Statement on Violence at the Capitol on January 6, 2021

January 2021

As an organization dedicated to the study of the power and effects of language and discourse, we feel the need to address the events of January 6—specifically, the riots and insurrection at the Capitol building during the congressional meeting to certify the results of the 2020 election. This event, though unprecedented in its particulars, was an expression of historic white supremacist narratives, and continued a tradition of domestic terrorism by white nationalist groups and their allies and affiliates. In this sense, this event marks a continuation of this historic white nationalist narrative, and in particular, the increasingly virulent attacks on democracy. In this statement, we draw attention to the power of language to call forth and bring about action, the power of rhetoric and writing to heal our pain, and our responsibility as educators.

We condemn the actions of the rioters of January 6th in the strongest possible terms, just as we condemn the language and actions of those who worked to legitimize and enable this event. Several statements issued by professional organizations and academic institutions are now in circulation; these speak to the magnitude and impacts of the riots, as well as to our obligations as professional educators to speak to the relationships among language, power, and social formations and actions. CCCC is committed to fostering inclusivity, equity, and social justice. The violence at the Capitol and the ongoing efforts at voter suppression are clear examples of what is at stake in this work.

We reaffirm our mission as teachers and scholars of rhetoric and writing to equip students with the means to make sense of their worlds and to instruct them in practices of attending to the meaning others may be making of their own. At present, it is possible for people to exist within bubbles of harmful misinformation. These spheres of misinformation are, in fact, cultures sustained by community relations, so this is part of the exigence for the educational work to be done. To strip misinformation of its power is not only critical but relational, and is attentive to the human interests at work. As literacy educators, we have a moral obligation to cultivate rhetorical awareness, so that as communicators, students will approach harmful, hateful messaging with the means to discern the distinctions between facts and lies and the motives at work in diverse rhetorical situations. Likewise, we call upon literacy educators to redouble their pedagogical efforts toward responsible use and dissemination of information.

A path forward includes strategies for both healing and action. Even as rhetoric has been largely responsible for creating the environment in which we now find ourselves, we offer rhetoric (including the repertoire of linguistic and actionable tools afforded by its use) to facilitate something positive: healing. We can work toward healing by supporting students and members of color, by providing avenues for students to process grief through writing and discussion, and by cultivating in students the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to make ethical and responsible choices as they engage in civic discourse. Lastly, we can continue to do our part as educators to produce citizens who understand, value, and advocate democratic principles that are built on a foundation of radical representative inclusion.

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