

Open letter to the College community:

We, the undersigned majors and minors of the English Department at Swarthmore College, are writing to express our support for the movement to divest college endowments from fossil fuels and reinvest in sustainable solutions to the climate crisis. We commend the faculty of our department for their bold decision to publish a letter urging the College to seriously consider divestment. As students, we feel it is our responsibility to go one step further and ask that the Board of Managers develop a plan to implement divestment within this school year.

We write this with the knowledge that our generation is the first to face the real possibility of a nearly uninhabitable planet by the end of our lifetimes. The methods of questioning that we have learned through our English classes are the same ones we must employ as we contemplate how to build the resiliency and community power needed to survive the climate crisis. These questions are fundamentally about how we tell stories: Who are the actors? Who are the objects? What is the narrative arc of this story and whose ideology does it serve? And, perhaps most critically, what is the relationship between the author and the text? These questions are integral to how we engage with the world today, and how we do the work of envisioning our futures.

English Professor Betsy Bolton made the connection between storytelling and climate justice when she spoke on this topic last year: “Climate change is adversely affecting primarily the people who are already disempowered and unfairly disadvantaged in the system that we have, and the only way to change that is for those of us who have greater privilege to use our voices to amplify the stories of those who cannot get that story out.” We know we hold great privilege not only as Swarthmore students but as students of English literature, a field of study that endows us with the ability to tell and interpret stories. Our education has given us the power to give shape and form not only to stories of climate crisis, environmental injustice, and systematic disempowerment, but to a visionary story about the just and stable future that we believe we can build together.

Professor Bolton is not the only professor who has encouraged our belief that it is imperative to build a powerful climate justice movement. We have gleaned insight and inspiration from many of the professors in our department, in a variety of ways, and we know that faculty have a critical role to play in pressuring the Board of Managers to stand on the right side of history by choosing to divest. We are grateful to the faculty who have already taken a stand on this issue, and we hope that their courage and conviction will inspire other professors to stand with the movement for climate justice.

From Peter Schmidt’s classes, we learned that it was our duty to continually search for ways of discovering how a text related to and could improve the situation we live in today. Similarly, in

Rachel Buurma's classes, we learned to see the relationship between ways of reading and ways of being. From Craig Williamson we learned of the struggle between the one ring and the fellowship, between the kind of power localized in just a few hands, and the power which arises from the connection of peoples and their mutual recognition of one another's struggles. Bakirathi Mani's classes taught us about the solidarity found in organizing and the dignity found in being a killjoy when the status quo that is being challenged is unjust and untenable. We firmly believe that justice is not being done as long as institutions like Swarthmore continue to support the fossil fuel industry with their investments.

Eric Song taught us about narratives that take both colonized and colonizers' perspectives, and we learned that the voices of the colonized are consistently ignored and displaced by dominant narratives that disregard distinctions in class and power. Lara Cohen's class on early American fiction helped us see the process by which European explorers and settlers despoiled this continent's resources and devastated its native peoples. We witness a similar lack of concern for human and environmental tolls in fossil fuel corporations' relentless search for profits today. Furthermore, we know that the economic and environmental destruction wrought by fossil fuel extraction is unevenly distributed along lines of privilege and power.

We turned our eyes to the "green worlds" explored by Nora Johnson's classes — those Shakespearean natural realms where we came to understand the influence that actions performed in one sphere have on the entire interconnected ecosystem. In Nat Anderson's classes we learned that verses not only give voice to the soul's request for liberation or damnation, but that the images which ring out from poems are also fundamentally informed by the landscape. We came to recognize as well that the voice in ourselves is irreparably bound to the planet we are born to, move through and die on — that the internal and external landscapes are in fact one.

Through our particular field of study, we have made it our priority to explore and understand the vitality of expression, and we know that this entails lending the power of our collective voice to the cause of climate justice. We want ourselves and our institution to be accountable to future generations. We know that the value of our work will be measured, years and decades from now, by how we responded to the crisis of authorship that we are currently faced with, in which fossil fuel corporations propagate the myth that their interminable existence is sustainable, while the stories of people losing their lives and livelihoods to climate catastrophes are glossed over. We will be measured by how hard we worked to unknow -- to borrow Phil Weinstein's term -- the legacy of destruction, exploitation, and business-as-usual that we have inherited.

With this in mind, we call on Swarthmore's Board of Managers to take swift action to develop a plan for us to divest from fossil fuel extraction companies and reinvest in sustainable and community-owned energy sources.

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