

University News

February 7, 2021

Montclair State University Statement Regarding Emily Johnson

Posted in: [University](#)



Montclair State University offers this response to Emily Johnson's [Jan. 22 posting on Medium](#).

The Office of Arts and Cultural Programming (ACP) at Montclair State University, under the leadership of Executive Director Jedediah Wheeler, works with highly diverse artists to provide a valuable opportunity for them to develop and present works on the stage of the Alexander Kasser Theater. ACP presents the critically-acclaimed PEAK Performances series, which since its founding in 2005 has gained an international reputation for enabling artists to express a wide range of ideas with complete artistic freedom. PEAK intentionally seeks out emerging artists, artists from underrepresented backgrounds, and artists whose work challenges established norms and practices.

In 2019, ACP approached Emily Johnson and invited her to discuss a possible collaboration. Mr. Wheeler became interested in Ms. Johnson's work after reading an essay that ACP invited her to submit for its publication, PEAK Journal, in response to "Cut the Sky," a PEAK performance presented by Marrugeku, a company of indigenous artists from Australia. He wanted to explore the possibility of a two-year residency with Ms. Johnson that would give her funding and time to develop an original work of art for the Kasser stage and provide the opportunity to work with faculty and students.

As discussions of the idea progressed, Ms. Johnson and her business manager, George Lugg, presented ACP with a number of contractual demands. These demands stipulated that ACP issue a Land Acknowledgement Statement, that it establish a land rental fund for the Lenape People, and that it make reparations to Indigenous People. In addition, Ms. Johnson demanded that the contract must obligate ACP and the University to engage in an unspecified process of “decolonisation.”

Mr. Wheeler and his office informed Ms. Johnson and Mr. Lugg that ACP lacked the authority to agree to such demands, which extend far beyond the scope of its function as an office that produces a performing arts series, and explained that ACP is only one of many hundreds of units and programs in the University and cannot make policy for the whole institution. In addition, ACP explained that the University has a robust, long-standing set of practices and policies, enthusiastically embraced by ACP, covering social justice, diversity, and inclusion and that these important matters are established at an institutional level. The University does not formulate and adopt important policy decisions by means of a contract with a particular performing artist. Rather, it follows a thoughtful, consultative process that involves all of the institution’s many stakeholders and culminates in the formal approval of new programs and policies.

ACP’s role is not now and has never been to take a position for or against the views of any artist it presents or any speaker it invites to campus. The mission of ACP, which it has carried out for years to great international acclaim, is not itself to speak, but rather to provide artists with an opportunity, a venue, the technical support, and the freedom to realize their artistic vision, in short, to give artists, such as Ms. Johnson, space to create their work and to be heard, free of censorship or interference. For example, if Ms. Johnson felt that making a Land Acknowledgment was important, she had complete freedom to do so within the context of her work, just as the artists who performed “Hatuey” did on the stage of the Kasser Theater in 2018.

Despite the inability to reach an agreement, Mr. Wheeler and his staff continued their best efforts to work with Ms. Johnson. Because the pandemic made the creation of a new work for the stage impossible, ACP, with Ms. Johnson’s input, revised and resubmitted a grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts, seeking funding for two online symposia she was to produce in 2021. A \$25,000 grant was approved for that purpose, but Ms. Johnson has since made it clear that, given ACP’s refusal to meet her non-negotiable demands, she does not intend to produce the symposia. Consequently, and regrettably, the University will inform the NEA that the symposia will not take place.

Mr. Wheeler regrets that it was not possible to reach an agreement with Ms. Johnson. He continues to respect her as an artist and looks forward to seeing her work produced on other stages. Mr. Wheeler acknowledges that he spoke forcefully and in frustration at one point during a difficult contract negotiation session, which came after repeated unsuccessful efforts to help Ms. Johnson and her manager understand the reasons that their demands could not be met. Mr. Wheeler did not use inappropriate language, and he never denigrated Ms. Johnson. Nevertheless, he regrets the ill feelings that resulted from the inability to reach agreement.

Under Mr. Wheeler’s leadership, over many years, the Office of Arts and Cultural Programming has successfully presented the work of many, many artists from diverse backgrounds. Just in the last decade, he has staged 30 major productions by diverse artists, including Black, Afro-Latinx, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian artists. Anyone who questions Mr. Wheeler’s commitment to supporting and working with artists simply cannot be aware of his long track record, while at Montclair State University and before. He has consistently sought out talented artists who were outsiders, shut out from mainstream venues, or whose ideas and visions were challenging and controversial, and he has provided them with professional support and an opportunity to be heard.

Montclair State University is a highly inclusive institution that is committed very strongly to enabling the positive and constructive educational power of diversity and that strongly supports the value of allowing all voices to be heard. Mr. Wheeler has consistently embodied those principles in the work he has done over many years, in the extraordinary artists that he has supported, in many collaborations with faculty, and in the productions that he has presented for the benefit of both community audiences and the University’s students.

This statement was updated on March 12, 2021 to reflect the University’s most current understanding of the matters explained in paragraphs 3 and 4.

Montclair State University

📍 1 Normal Ave.
Montclair, NJ 07043

📞 973-655-4000

🗺️ Campus Map



NEWS CENTER

Contact Media Relations

University News

Faculty Experts

Media Gallery

Montclair Magazine

MONTCLAIR STATE



[About Montclair](#)

[Academics](#)

[Admissions](#)

[Alumni](#)

[Arts and Culture](#)

[Athletics](#)

[Red Hawk Life](#)

[Giving](#)

[Research](#)

POLICIES



[Copyright and Disclaimer](#)

[Title IX Information](#)

[Emergency/Plans](#)

[Notice of Non-Discrimination](#)

[Annual Security Report](#)

[Middle States Accreditation](#)

[Website Privacy Notice](#)