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## Advocacy for Minority Groups

**"Minority groups in the United States, especially the non-white minorities, suffer crippling discrimination in jobs, housing, civil rights, and education. And they continue to face a school curriculum that, for them, is culturally impoverished. Ironically, it is also a curriculum which, in a different fashion, cripples white students and teachers by denying them the opportunity to learn about...other Americans who are non-whites.**

**From "Non-white minorities in English and Language Arts Materials," by the NCTE Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English**

On the whole, NCTE has consistently been on the progressive side on issues of race. In his book, *A Long Way Together: A Personal View of NCTE's First Sixty-Seven Years*, J.N. Hook explains the Council's record:

"Throughout its life, [NCTE] had attempted to treat all groups – all students, all teachers, all its members – alike. It had, for instance, been one of the first professional organizations to insist that its conventions be housed only in places where there would be no racial discrimination. It had gone beyond that [in 1964 when] the Board of Directors...mandated that all associations affiliated with the Council be completely open with regard to race and ethnicity; within two years all affiliates – some in the face of considerable difficulty – had satisfied that requirement." (1979, p. 232)

Until the 1940s, however, concerns regarding minority groups were largely non-existent in the Council's official business. Hook describes that the Council's Executive Committee minutes did not mention any minority issues, nor were any committees commissioned that specifically dealt with race. Awareness of race-related issues rose slightly during the early 40s with the publication of *We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature*, by Charlemae Rollins, in 1941. This book was the first NCTE publication to wholly focus on African American literature. Concerned that white students who did not receive any exposure to other races in their daily lives were more prone to racism, Rollins provided a list of books that counter the stereotypes being perpetuated at that time.

The 1960s mark when the NCTE took a much more active role in racial matters. As previously mentioned, in 1964, the Board of Directors mandated that the Council and its affiliates be open to all races and ethnicities (Hook, 1979, p. 232). In 1969, the NCTE formed the Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English (p. 233). This Task Force primarily focused on encouraging teachers to use more works authored by minorities, as well as to discourage discrimination in textbooks. The Task Force would prove successful, releasing several publications and garnering media attention.

As the decades passed, NCTE still maintained its interest in minority affairs, advocating for fair representation and diversity. To learn more about how NCTE became an advocate for minority groups, take a look at the featured records below.

**Contents:**(To enlarge an image, click on it and it will open in a new window)

[We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature](#)

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## We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature

The first NCTE publication to focus on race, *We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature* by Charlemae Rollins, listed books by and about African Americans and their lives. Troubled by the racism in schools, the author theorized that stereotypes, combined with the lack of personal ties to any African Americans, were fueling the students' harmful attitudes. Rollins wrote: "Some white youth will never have the opportunity to know intimately Negroes who live as they do...If such young people are introduced to a few books which portray Negro life not only as it is lived by Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas...but as it is lived by Florence Means's Harriet in *Shuttered Windows*...they will lose some of their feelings of condescension and they will gain in understanding" (p. 3). Rollins then provided a bibliography she thought gave a realistic, accurate portrait of African American life.

**Item:** First edition of *We Build Together: A Reader's Guide to Negro Life and Literature* (1941)

**To learn about related material, see the following record series:** [15/71/809](#)

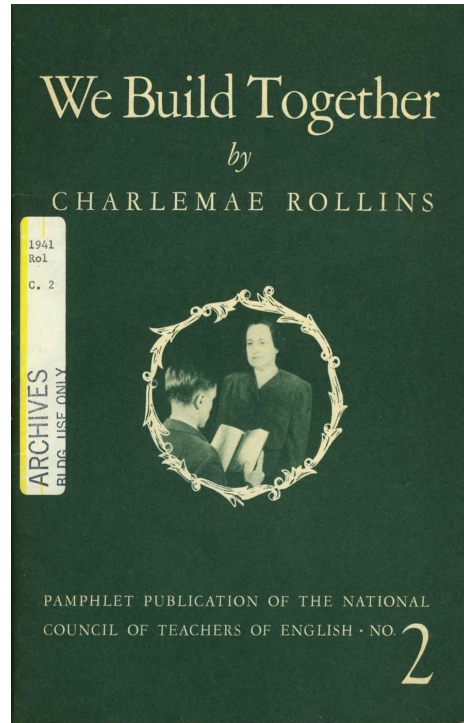


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## WE BUILD TOGETHER

### THE NEED FOR A HIGH SCHOOL GUIDE

Two young graduate students of the Chicago Teachers College were assigned practice teaching in the eighth grade at an elementary school where the children were all American-born white. The school was in a district quite removed from any Negroes. The children knew nothing about them except what they had read in newspapers or heard from parents. Their knowledge of this race, therefore, was limited to second- or thirdhand information, except perhaps in a very few cases where Negroes may have been employed as servants.

These students—one a young man and the other a young woman—were keenly interested in building a unit around the particular interest of the majority of the children in the class.

One day on the playground the young woman asked a member of the class, a girl who seemed to be most popular, what she planned to do after graduation.

"I want to take up sewing," she replied; "but I guess I can't because I'd have to go to Lucy Flower High School to specialize in that. I don't want to go there because Negroes do."

"Do you object to going to school with Negroes?" asked the young cadet.

"Yes, I do," was the emphatic reply.

The two teachers began comparing notes. Each found that the other had encountered the same situation.

A carefully worded questionnaire to all the members of the class revealed that every student preferred going to school where there were no Negroes.

This seemed to the cadets to be an appalling situation. What could be done? Certainly something should be done. In a conference with the principal they found him to be as surprised and dismayed by this situation as they had been. He assured them he was willing and eager to co-operate in any plans they made. The approach to this problem had to be gradual and careful.

First the pupils' interest fields were probed, and the class divided into groups. These groups, roughly divided, were sports, music, photography, drawing, reading, science, etc. As the groups worked

along their chosen fields, Negroes active in those same fields were introduced to them.

The members of the science group had never heard of Dr. George Washington Carver, the Negro scientist who had made hundreds of products from the peanut and the sweet potato. When told about him they decided to write him at Tuskegee. This they did, and he answered with interesting information about his life and work. They did not know that the first successful operation ever to be performed upon the human heart was done in Chicago by a Negro surgeon, Dr. Daniel Hale Williams. They were eager to visit the hospital where he had once worked. When the sports group, already familiar with Joe Louis, Henry Armstrong, and other Negro athletes, heard that "Bernie" Jefferson, star player on Northwestern's football team, was a classmate of the cadets at Chicago Teachers College, they wanted to see him. He was invited to visit the school, and, when he came, all clamored for his autograph. He thrilled them by going down on the playground to teach them firsthand examples of football technique. The photography group took moving pictures and snapshots of this and other groups in action.

The whole project seemed doomed for lack of material on the Negro suitable for this group of slow readers, until the teachers were directed to the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, which is located in the heart of Chicago's great "black belt." There, with the help of the librarians, they found books, lists, and pictures showing the achievements of the Negro in all fields. These books were made available to the children by being put into the classroom library. Among those found most useful for their project were: *Unsung Heroes* by Haynes; *For Freedom* by Fauset; *We Sing America* by Cuthbert; *Dunbar's Little Brown Baby*; *An Elementary History of America* by Eppse; *Negro Art, Music and Rhyme* by Whiting; and others listed and annotated in the Bibliography for Children.

The art and modeling group did posters of various phases of Negro life. Cotton-picking in the South, steamboating, and other occupations were developed into an interesting realistic diorama.

To close the unit, they decided to have a "Shortening Bread Party" (their own idea), and they invited all who had helped them build it. They wrote a radio skit, "The Cavalcade of a Race"—a program interspersed with records: "Ballad for Americans" sung

The cover, table of contents, and pages from *We Build Together*. The first two pages shared an anecdote about the problem of racism in schools that inspired the author to write the book.

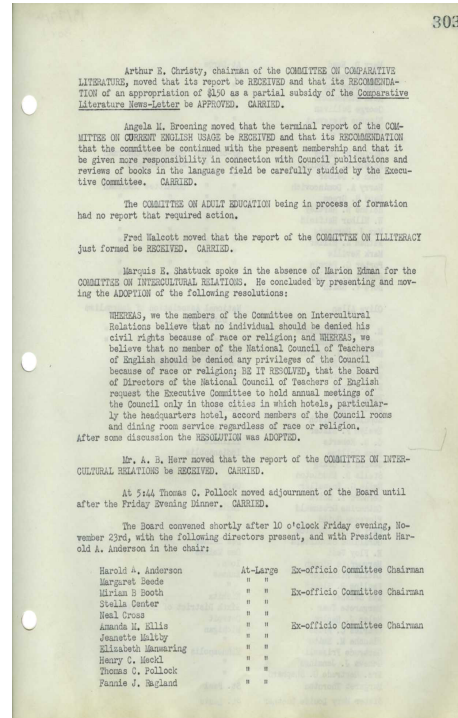
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## Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, 1945

In 1945, the NCTE Board of Directors took direct action against racism. During the Board's annual meeting, the Committee on Intercultural Relations presented a resolution proposing that NCTE "hold annual meetings of the Council only in those cities in which hotels, particularly the headquarters hotel, accord members of the Council rooms and dining room service regardless of race or religion." The Board of Directors passed and adopted this resolution.

Item: Board of Directors Meeting Minutes (1945)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/70/001](#)



The minutes of NCTE's annual meeting recorded the Board accepting the resolution.

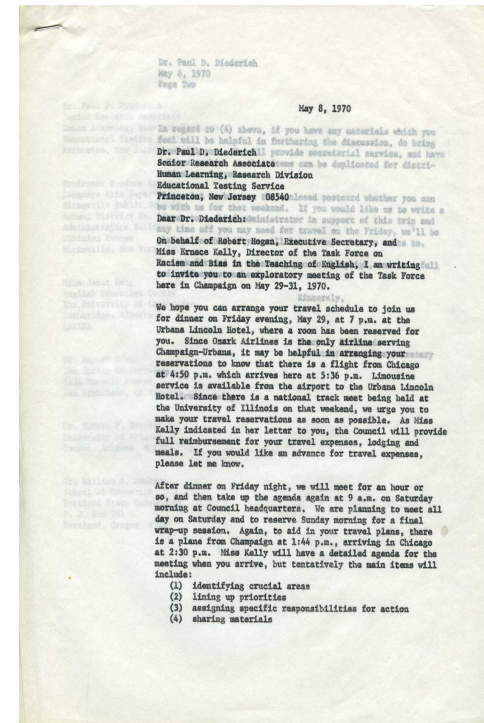
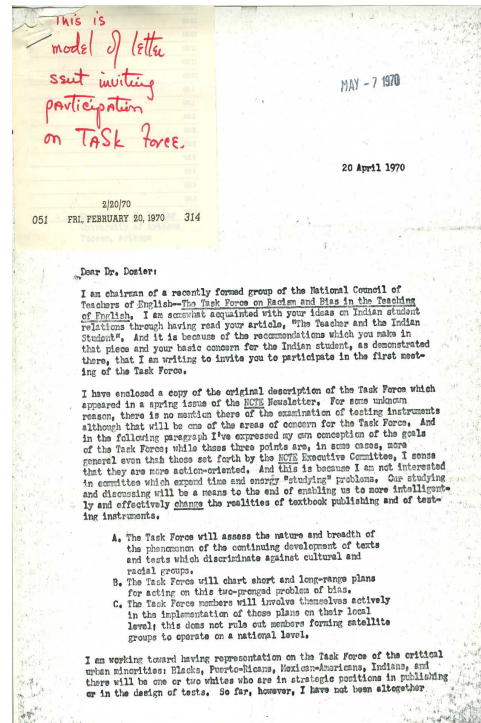
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## Formation of the Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English

One of the most significant actions the Council took regarding race-related matters was the establishment of the Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English in 1969. This task force helped to continually bring attention to issues concerning minorities and their representation. Ernece B. Kelly was the first chair of this committee. Her first responsibility was to recruit members. In her invitations to potential members, she described the goals of the task force. The first objective of the three she listed read: "The task force will assess the nature and breadth of the phenomenon of the continuing development of texts and tests which discriminate against cultural and racial groups."

Item: Correspondence inviting potential members (1970)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/008



Letters from Ernece B. Kelly to recruit potential members to the new Task Force on Racism and Bias.

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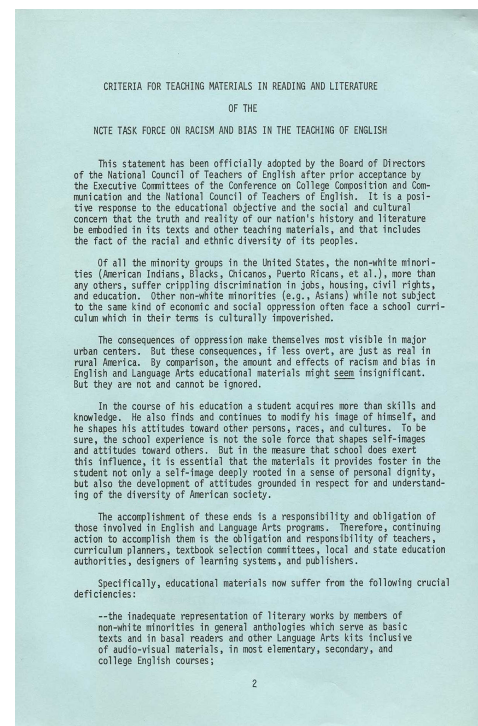
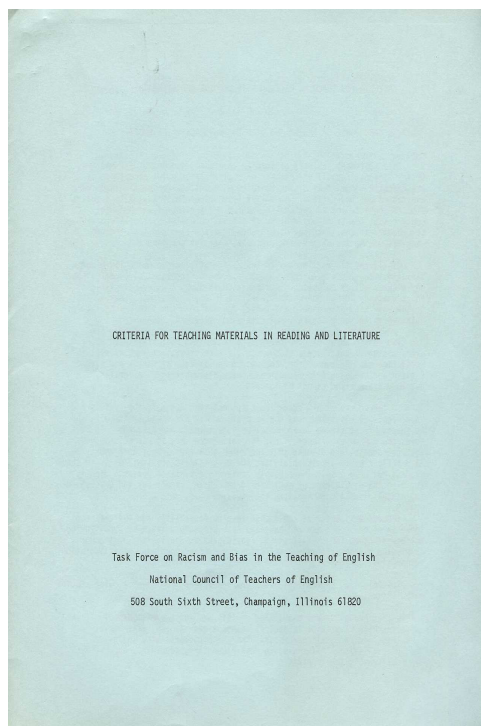
## Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature

One of the first major achievements of the task force was its publication of *Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature* in 1970. This document defined the problems with current teaching materials and offered a list of criteria to select appropriate classroom texts. Its rationale read in part: "The school experience

is not the sole force that shapes self-images and attitudes toward other persons, races, and cultures. But in the measure that school does exert this influence, it is essential that the materials it provides foster in the student not only a self-image deeply rooted in a sense of personal dignity, but also the development of attitudes grounded in respect for and understanding the diversity of American society." NCTE's Board of Directors officially adopted this statement of criteria.

**Item: Copy of *Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature* (1970)**

**To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/803**



The cover and page from *Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature*. The first page introduced and defined the problems of biased teaching materials and the effect they could potentially have on students.

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## Publicity: "Native Myths, Tales Open 'Storehouse'" and "NCTE Task Force to Combat Racism and Bias in Textbooks"

The Task Force was able to attract press attention soon after its inception. On December 12, 1970, the *Capital-Journal* in Salem, OR., featured a story on Native American literature and the decision of a group of Native American scholars to more openly share their literary traditions. Task force member, Montana Rickards commented on the importance of this event: "Now at last a group of Native Indian scholars is emerging which,

with the trust of their people, may unlock at last this long-neglected element of American culture." The promotion of Native American literature was an important cause of the task force. The *Chicago South Suburban News* ran a story on the task force itself a couple of weeks later on December 26, 1970. It highlighted the task force's recent publication of *Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature*. The article began: "A nationwide effort to notify school textbook publishers and educators of new criteria for purging the materials they publish and the lessons they teach of possible racism and bias is the major project of a special task force of the National Council of Teachers of English." Ernece Kelly was quoted throughout the article, explaining the new criteria her task force developed.

**Item:** Newspaper clippings about the Task Force (1970)

**To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/73/008](#)**



The newspaper clippings from *Capital-Journal* and *Chicago South Suburban News* in 1970 discussed issues directly relevant to the concerns of the Task Force on Racism and Bias.

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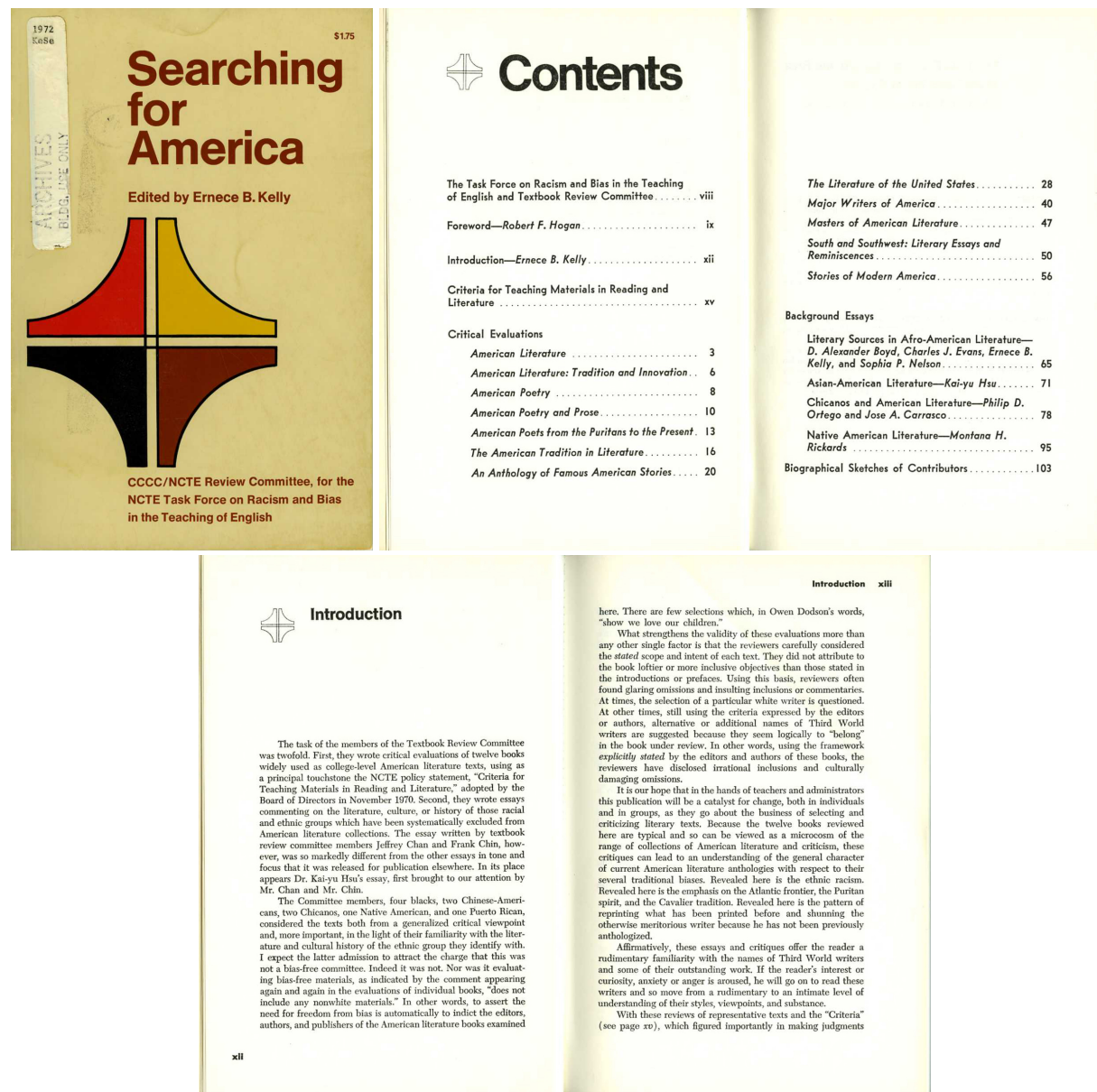
Searching for America



In 1972, NCTE published the anthology, *Searching for America*, edited by Ernece B. Kelly. The book, written together by fellow members of the task force, provided evaluations and essays on American literature taught in college and whether they fit the criteria put forth by the task force. In the introduction, Kelly wrote, "It is our hope that in the hands of teachers and administrators this publication will be a catalyst for change, both in individuals and in groups, as they go about the business of selecting and criticizing literary texts."

**Item:** Copy of *Searching for America* (1972)

**To learn about related material, see the following record series: [15/73/803](#)**



The cover, table of contents, and introduction of *Searching for America*. The introduction explained the rationale behind the authors' assessment of American literature and poetry and the book's ultimate purpose.

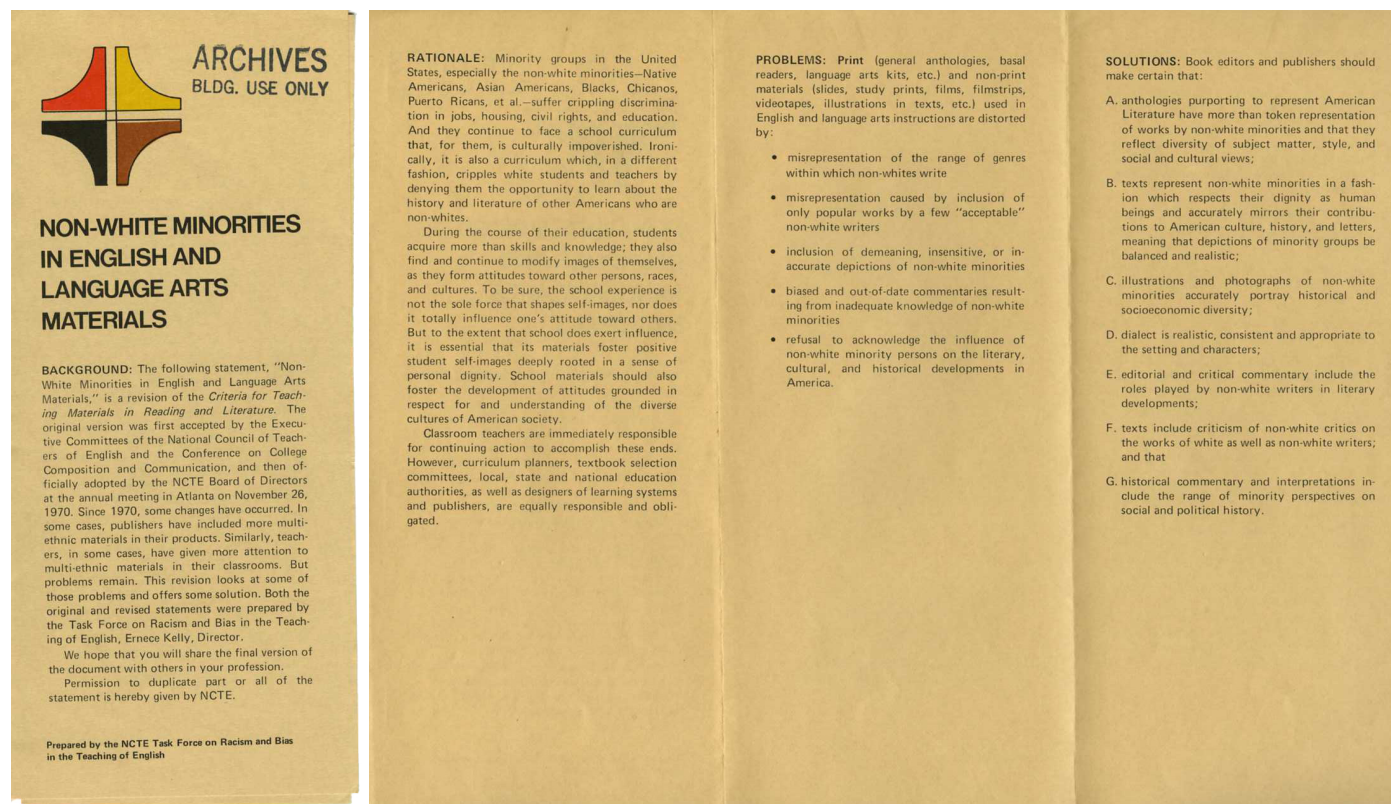
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## Non-White Minorities in English and Language Arts Materials

In 1978, the task force revised its *Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature* and renamed its statement, *Non-White Minorities in English and Language Arts Materials*. The task force acknowledged that many publishers moved in a positive direction and have included more "multi-ethnic materials in their products" since 1970. However, the task force believed there were still problems with the representation of non-white minorities. The statement in this brochure sought to identify and provide a remedy to those issues.

**Item: Copy of *Non-White Minorities in English and Language Arts Materials* (1978)**

**To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/803**



**The brochure, *Non-White Minorities in English and Language Arts Materials*, was an updated statement from the Task Force on Racism and Bias, highlighting new problems in language arts materials and possible solutions.**

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