

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

July 1, 2020

Eli Capilouto  
President  
University of Kentucky  
101 Main Building  
Lexington, KY 40506-0032

Dear President Capilouto,

As an organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we were concerned to learn that the University of Kentucky recently reversed course and decided to remove a WPA-era mural by Ann Rice O’Hanlon depicting a history of Kentucky that many believed sanitized the portrayal of slavery and presented stereotypes and caricatures of people of color. In doing so, the University has effectively negated a contemporary work by a Black artist that it specifically commissioned in 2018 to, in your words, set up “a dialogue between the two pieces of art.”<sup>1</sup>

As the artist Karyn Olivier has pointed out, her work, *Witness*, “was not created to magically dispel or absolve the University of Kentucky from embedded institutional white supremacy and oppression. It wasn’t meant to tie up the ‘race problem’ in a neat bow. *The day I completed my response to the mural was the day the real work needed to begin.*”<sup>2</sup>

Many other public institutions and municipalities have wrestled with how to respond to requests to remove murals that depict – and, some argue, perpetuate – our country’s racist past. However, this is the first instance we are aware of in which the removal of a mural by a white artist will have the simultaneous effect of silencing the work of a Black artist.

Right now, as our country is coming to a moment of painful reckoning with its history of slavery and systematic racial oppression and confronting indelible, nightmarish images of police violence against people of color, an institution of

<sup>1</sup> *The Washington Post*, Aug. 24, 2018. “Some saw a University of Kentucky mural as racially offensive. Here’s the school’s solution.” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-racially-offensive. Here’s the school’s solution.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/08/24/some-saw-a-university-of-kentucky-mural-as-racist-so-the-school-found-a-solution/>

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Karyn Olivier to University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto, June 10, 2020.

## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors’ Equity Association  
AICA-USA  
American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Professors  
American Association of University Women  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators Association  
American Society of Journalists & Authors  
Americans United for Separation of Church & State  
Association of American Publishers  
Authors Guild  
Catholics for Choice  
Children’s Literature Association  
College Art Association  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
Freedom to Read Foundation  
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice  
International Literacy Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The NewsGuild-CWA  
PEN America  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Project Censored  
SAG-AFTRA  
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children’s Book Writers & Illustrators  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ  
Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church,  
United Methodist Communications  
Women’s American ORT  
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

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higher learning is exactly the kind of place where complex dialogues should take place. But instead of doing the difficult work of engaging in that dialogue, the university has concluded after two years – *and without consulting with Ms. Olivier* – that “the spaces we have created for dialogue, and the work we have commissioned to expand conversation and contextualize art, haven’t worked, frankly.”<sup>3</sup>

As Ms. Olivier pointed out in a 2019 open letter to the UK community in response to student concerns, “If the art is removed, doesn’t it just give folks an out? An excuse not to remember painful realities? Historical amnesia? And negate the need for our continued fight?”<sup>4</sup>

We urge you to reconsider your decision to remove the mural and to instead pursue the University’s original goal of engaging in the sustained, difficult and complex conversations that can arise in contemplation of these old and new works.

We stand ready to offer assistance as needed.

Sincerely yours,



Christopher Finan  
Executive Director  
National Coalition Against Censorship

**NCAC.ORG**

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<sup>3</sup> *Statement* of University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto, issued June 5, 2020. <https://uknow.uky.edu/campus-news/memorial-hall-mural-our-past-our-present-and-why-it-s-time-move-forward>

<sup>4</sup> *Letter* to University of Kentucky community from artist Karyn Olivier, April 10, 2019. <https://uknow.uky.edu/campus-news/letter-uk-community-artist-karyn-olivier>