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**NCAC Calls on University of Kentucky to Halt Removal of
Mural Depicting Slavery at the Expense of a Contemporary Black Artists' Work**

Separately, Poet and Essayist Wendell Berry Files Lawsuit to Preserve Both Works

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(NEW YORK)--The National Coalition Against Censorship today made public a [letter](#) calling on the University of Kentucky (UK) to halt the removal of a 1930's-era [mural](#) depicting slavery, saying that doing so would negate the work of Karyn Olivier, a noted Black artist who created an [installation](#) responsive to the mural.

"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," said NCAC Executive Director Christopher Finan in its July 1 letter to University president Eli Capilouto. "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."

In a separate development, the poet and essayist Wendell Berry, who is related by marriage to the original muralist, Ann Rice O'Hanlon, today announced a [lawsuit](#) asking a Kentucky Circuit Court to stop the university from removing both works. NCAC and Olivier are not parties to the lawsuit.

"The University's decision to remove the O'Hanlon mural also renders my work Witness blind and mute," said Olivier. "It cannot exist without the past it sought to confront. And it is ironic that the decision to censor the original artwork has, in one fell swoop, censored my installation, too."

"I'm not saying that both works should exist in perpetuity," Olivier added. "But the day I completed my response to the mural was the day the university's real work needed to begin. The mural's scheduled removal instead chooses silence, erasure and avoidance over engagement, investigation and real reconciliation."

In its letter to Capilouto, NCAC noted that the University, which had invited Olivier to create her installation in 2018 as a response to the Black Student Union's calls to remove the mural, did not notify her of its abrupt decision to remove the original mural. The June 5th announcement did not specify the fate of Olivier's installation.

The mural has been the subject of controversy over the years. In late 2015, a group of students from the African American & Africana Studies department met with UK president Eli Capilouto to voice concerns about the experience of people of color on campus, including the presence of the O'Hanlon mural, located in the university's Memorial Hall.

NCAC urged the university to preserve the mural and continue to display it with added information that would place it within a broader context of the state's and the nation's history of slavery. Since the mural is a fresco, relocation was not a possibility. As a temporary "solution" the administration chose to cover the work in white fabric.

When the administration announced its decision in 2018 to commission a new work by Karyn Olivier, NCAC hailed it as "a model for other universities and cultural institutions that face outcries over problematic historical artworks." In a blog post, NCAC [observed](#): "While other universities, as well as UK, have re-contextualized difficult historical works with signage or labels that explain their historical context, UK went further by commissioning Olivier to create a new work to keep the conversation going."

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The **National Coalition Against Censorship** is a coalition of over 50 national organizations committed to protecting and defending freedom of expression. NCAC has promoted the freedom to think, create and explore and opposed censorship in all its forms for 45 years.