

Living in the Wake—An Open Letter to the Arts & Sciences Community

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Black lives matter. This is an indisputable truth. In the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, I am reeling—like so many of you—because that truth has again been denied; because, in the words of Christina Sharpe, we have never stopped living in the wake. Living in the wake of the slave trade, living in the wake of plantation slavery, living in the wake of Jim Crow, living in the wake of black lives being treated as disposable, as if they do not matter.

Black lives matter. And more than matter. If it is one of our founding tragedies that the history of the nation is fundamentally entwined with the violent history of slavery, then as the great historian John Hope Franklin has taught us, the long and broken road from slavery to freedom has been fashioned, over and over, by black writers, artists, activists, politicians, and everyday people expanding the boundaries of freedom, living and creating the fuller dream of democracy, for everyone.

Black lives matter. There is no need for a message from me to make that true. It is true. But we are reeling because while it is the indisputable testament of history that black lives have made the dream of democracy more than a dream, it is also the indisputable testament of our eyes that that dream remains unfulfilled. The university has a role to play in advancing that dream.

“What is the university for?” That question is not mine. It is a question posed by the South African historian Premesh Lalu. His answer is that if we do not know what we are for enduringly we cannot know, in any urgent moment, what we are for currently--what we must be for now. What are we for? Many things. Scholarship, the freedom of thought, the advance of knowledge. Beneath all these, giving them all their purpose, I believe, we are *for* the possibility of democratic life together. We are for the great unfinished business of democracy, for the increase of freedom and dignity and true equality. Always, enduringly, urgently, now.

How will we recommit ourselves to that work? In countless ways, more than I have the limited capacity to imagine. In ways we will need to learn from each other and I will need to learn from you. But certainly in these ways: in the courses we teach, in the research we pursue, in the faculty we hire, in the graduate students we invite into our seminars and labs, in the undergraduates we educate, in the work ahead of reopening the university—not just to what is has been but to what it can more fully become.

I am grateful to you for all that you do in pursuing that work and that call.

Ian

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