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.”

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.*”

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

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2 Letter from Karyn Olivier to University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto, June 10, 2020.
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.”

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?”

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

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