

Opinion by **Karyn Olivier**

Removing an offensive mural from the University of Kentucky isn't 'racial justice'

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Watching the demands for racial reckoning echo across our nation, I keep thinking about something Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote: "[Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice.](#)"

Particularly as a black artist, I know that the path forward is laced with thorny questions. How do we begin to rectify the wrongs wrought by 400 years of oppression?

An obvious place to start our course correction is with historic symbols of racism:

Confederate flags and monuments, artwork steeped in bigoted ideologies. But even here, there are no easy answers. Which statues must go? Do problematic artworks fashioned decades ago reflect a spectrum of offensiveness that needs deliberation, or should they all be taken away? Might some serve as catalysts — as useful sites for interrogation of our nation's complicated history?

Toward that end, consider a much-debated artwork at the University of Kentucky, a piece that I think should be saved.

This [1934 mural](#), a flawed and problematic fresco by Ann Rice O'Hanlon, has been controversial for years. Calls for its removal have persisted, mostly from black students. The painting depicts Kentucky history and contains images that were stereotypes in the 1930s and that are patently offensive today. Black slaves work the fields and play music for dancing white folks; a Native American with a tomahawk appears poised to attack a white woman. Etc.

In 2015, university President Eli Capilouto [cloaked the mural](#) while the community debated its fate. A decision was made to unveil the mural alongside a newly commissioned artwork, by a black artist, that would offer greater context and another entry point for examination of the mural. I was chosen for this project and [in 2018 unveiled “Witness,”](#) an installation on the domed ceiling of Memorial Hall’s vestibule, outside the room where O’Hanlon’s fresco is displayed.

My work replicated the black and brown figures depicted in the mural, positioning them against a gilded background on the dome; without the context of surrounding whiteness, the figures took on new meanings. Four decorative panels beneath the dome were embellished to memorialize historically overlooked black and native Kentuckians of great accomplishment. The piece was created to inspire reflection — on itself and the mural’s content, history and meaning today.

Almost immediately, students decried it as “not enough.”

Last month, as [demands for racial justice](#) grew after the killing of George Floyd, Capilouto announced that the O’Hanlon mural would be removed. It seemed like an action to quell the black fury felt from Lexington to Louisville (where [Breonna Taylor’s killers](#) still walk free).

But the decision has larger consequences: Removing O’Hanlon’s mural mutes my work. As the National Coalition Against Censorship pointed out in a July 1 [letter](#) urging that the mural not be removed, “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.”

Instead of an embrace of the polemics the two works engendered — a thoughtful dialogue between the work of a white woman of 1934 and a black woman of 2018 — an action of political correctness, which some might see as a good deed, was offered to appease those who oppose O’Hanlon’s mural. But just as Band-Aids have not healed the wounds in our national history, a quick-fix approach won’t work here.

My disappointment as an artist and an educator is rooted in the university's anti-intellectual stance, one that runs counter to the purpose of higher education. Where else, if not in a university setting, should our thinking, opinions and assumptions be challenged? Why this false choice between free speech or racial justice? My goal in creating "Witness" was to posit: *Is it possible to hold opposing ideas and realities in one hand? Can we harness the tough questions they raise to wade into the pain, complexity and frightening histories of America, and consider the possibilities and resilience of black and brown people?*

My work was not created to magically dispel or absolve the University of Kentucky from embedded, institutional white supremacy or oppression. It wasn't meant to neatly tie up the "race problem." The disparate emotions around O'Hanlon's mural and my work should have been met with a long-term plan and commitment to investigate and address racism on campus and beyond. The day I completed my response to the mural was the day the university's real work needed to begin. Instead, removing the mural chooses silence, erasure and avoidance over engagement, investigation and real reconciliation. Is the hope that we'll simply *forget* our shared history?

There will be no quick fixes for the wrongs of the past four centuries. We're going to have to do some thoughtful work. Hopefully, our interrogation of the past will allow us to emerge with a more complex understanding that our citizenship must embrace history, art *and* justice.