Dear History Department Community:

The events of the last several weeks have laid bare the fundamental challenges that we as a nation – and specifically the most privileged among us – still face in living up to our promise as a polity that truly values freedom, liberty, and equality for all peoples. Indeed, protests around the world have made clear that the persistence of racial injustice is not a problem unique to the United States, even if it has taken specific historical forms here. Let me begin by saying that the History Department unequivocally supports the strong statement made by the College of Arts and Sciences, and we stand with the many other units within the CU Boulder community, to condemn racism and police brutality and to recognize our need to do more as a campus community to assume our full responsibility for ending these historical patterns of injustice and violence. Moreover, as the American Historical Association notes in its compelling statement on “The History of Racist Violence in the United States,” we, as historians, must help others to understand the deep-historical nature of the troubling patterns of racism before us, and to preach a core value of the humanities: a studied commitment to what it means to be humane in a world of difference.

On the final exam in my Modern U.S. History survey this past semester, I asked students to provide a critical reading of a well-known political cartoon from a little more than a decade ago. The cartoon has two panes: on the left sits Rosa Parks on a bus, with the year “1955” written above her; on the right sits Barack Obama in the back of a limousine, with “2008” written above him. I charged my students with answering two questions about this cartoon. First, I asked them to explain its historical narrative, the story about change over time that it tells. That answer seems straightforward: the cartoon offers a simple (and, indeed, vastly simplified) cause-and-effect story, one of heroic African American civil rights activism, embodied by Rosa Parks, culminating in the election of the first African American president of the United States. Then I asked my students a more vexing question: was that progressive story an accurate rendering of the trajectory of postwar African American history? While we covered the long Civil Rights Movement and its inspiring achievements in dismantling Jim Crow segregation, we also talked about how much work remained undone and how new forms of racial injustice such as the mass incarceration of people of color had cast a long shadow over those momentous civil rights achievements. The answer to that second question, in other words, was much less straightforward, but, sadly, I expected that my students would respond with some variation on “no.” And that is just what most of them did – even before they knew about the vigilante killing of Ahmaud Arbery and police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. The nation’s long history of racial oppression and violence still weighs heavily upon us. As the AHA statement rightly notes, “What happened to George Floyd stands well within our national tradition.”

As President, Barack Obama favored a quote of Martin Luther King’s (which King himself had adapted from others), so much so that he apparently had it stitched into a rug that lay in the oval office: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” The “arc of the moral universe” is another name for history, and the idea that it bends towards justice has always been a powerful one for me. I have wanted to believe in the progressive narrative of that cartoon, but in this current moment it is difficult to do so. One way to understand King’s quote is as an article of faith: that despite the frequent and overwhelming evidence to the contrary that confronts us, we should have faith that the world can and will be a better place. I can only imagine how such a faith was and remains a necessary resource for people of color for whom the arc of the moral universe has seemed merely long. But as students of the discipline of history, I also hope we recognize – now more than ever – that history does not bend itself towards justice. It must be bent. As students of history, we must understand and communicate the powerful historical dimensions of recent events, knowing that undoing what ails us will involve a full reckoning with the weight of the past. We must also acknowledge the differential trauma caused by recent events. We have different histories and historical experiences, and the strength of our community – of any community – comes not only in
appreciating and respecting those differences but also in recognizing that those different histories are the very stuff of injustice and privilege.

Our department – like our discipline as a whole – is committed to crafting and communicating historical interpretations of racial injustice and violence that are essential to their dismantling. We study, write, and teach history to bend the world towards justice. We are also committed to creating an inclusive community among our students, faculty, and staff, and to continuing to shape our curriculum and revise our teaching methodologies to achieve these ends. But I also recognize that there is more that we need to do to diversify our community and make our department a welcoming and collaborative space for all, and particularly for people of color. We can also do more to be an insistent voice for the kinds of institutional change that are so necessary at CU Boulder, and to get beyond the campus walls to be agents of change rather than those who merely study them. Those are my commitments as we move forward into the coming year, and I invite you all to take an active role in the conversations we need to have and the actions we need to take to advance these goals.

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