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Roy Cooper, Governor
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I have begun this letter more times than I can count.

And I am afraid that this will be quite long, because I must take my time. And because this is personal for me.

This is personal for all of us.

Louder and louder, we hear a crying out of the names George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, along with the words "Black Lives Matter," and "Say Their Names."

What is this moment to the keepers of memory? Do we begin to prepare an archive for George Floyd, born in Fayetteville?

How are we called to act? Do we open up our common spaces as wailing walls for grief and outrage and gathering grounds for healing and reflection?

Yes.

This and much, much more.

For guidance and inspiration, I have turned to many sources of late.

I have sought out, again, my own sense of self in the woods that surround Historic Stagville, one of my ancestral touchstones, where I reflect upon, mourn, and marvel at the enslaved lives of my people.

I have also sought wisdom in the words of peacefully enraged (yes it is possible) protesters, who currently gather in the midst of monuments they both decry, yet imbue, by their presence, new meaning, new declarations of equity and human equality.

I have also sought words of resonance from Harriet Jacobs, John Hope Franklin, David Walker, and Pauli Murray.

And lastly, I have also sought out the oral histories of my own family.

One particular story keeps calling to me, beckoning me to lean in. A story some of you have heard before.



Allow me to share it again.

In the summer of 1946, my maternal grandfather, Gustave Hamilton Caution, Jr. (yes this is his real name) had just turned 16 years old. At this time, he and his mother lived in Philadelphia, though born in Wilmington and Fayetteville, respectively.

Nearly six weeks after my grandfather's birthday, two African American couples (George W. and Mae Murray Dorsey, and Roger and Dorothy Malcom) were brutally, sadistically murdered by a lynch mob, near Moore's Ford Bridge in Georgia.

One of the two women was pregnant. (I will spare you the details, in this moment, but encourage your own deeper exploration of the unborn baby's fate.)

One of the men was a recently returned veteran, in the Pacific Theater of WWII.

Gus, my grandfather, would have perhaps heard about this horror, from his father who served as a Chaplain in North Africa during the same war, or perhaps from the black-owned "Pittsburgh Courier" newspaper, which boasted a national audience.

The brutality of the Moore's Ford Bridge lynching had inspired President Truman to create a Committee on Civil Rights and to implore Congress to pass an antilynching bill.

In the autumn, Gus returned to Central High School, an all-male, predominantly white school in Philadelphia.

December of that year, "The Pittsburgh Courier" pondered with its readership why Congress had not yet acted.

My grandfather appeared to have posted the Courier's article, in solidarity, on a bulletin board at his predominantly white school.

The principal demanded that my grandfather remove the article.

My grandfather refused.

This was Gus's peaceful protest.

He was permanently expelled.

Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown reluctantly welcomed Gus to the alma mater of two of his aunts, Palmer Memorial Institute, an all-black boarding school and now home to one of our State Historic Sites, the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum, in Sedalia, North Carolina.



Gus transferred one more time, to another black boarding school, Mary Potter Academy, in Oxford, North Carolina, which would in 1970 see its own highly protested, racial murder of Henry Dortress "Dickie" Marrow, Jr.

My grandfather never lived to see Congress pass an antilynching bill, nor did my mother, who died young.

As I prepare this letter, I am reading news coverage that the Emmett Till Antilynching Act is stalled in Congress even now, in 2020, as our world rises in uproar over racial violence, during a pandemic, which is disproportionately killing black people.

These are cataclysmic and historic times, indeed.

What do I make of our roles, historians, scribes, and witnesses, in the midst of all this?

What am I learning and relearning?

Lesson 1: One of the greatest acts of racial violence is the erasure of a people through silence.

Lesson 2: One of the most significant acts of antiracist public history work, is to amplify the silenced narratives and declare, with specificity and care, the lives of traditionally marginalized people. (I am including here, American Indian lives as well.)

As the first African American director of the Division of State Historic Sites and Properties, and a public humanities professional committed to dismantling racism, it is my daily call to seek more ways to achieve "True Inclusion."

We are far from where we need to be.

While our staff does not come close to reflecting the demographics of our communities of color, we have recently made history with several, African American public historians joining our ranks, in roles of leadership and influence.

We also have a multiracial coalition of colleagues increasingly committed to antiracist and inclusive programming, interpretation, and engagement. Some of our colleagues have been in this particular vineyard for years at places like Somerset and the State Capitol, and more recently at places like President James K. Polk Historic Site and several of our Civil War-era sites, where staff have been seeking new ways to connect with African American histories and communities.

We collectively understand that failure, in this endeavor, is not even remotely an option.



In the days and months to come, you will see and hear more of our commitment to "True Inclusion."

We will say the names that reveal the impact of black lives on our soil, louder and more frequently.

We will commit to sharing more narratives that reveal the histories of racism in our state and beyond.

This work has already begun, with the purchase of the Golden Frinks Freedom House in Edenton. (Golden Frinks led many social justice movements, one of them the protest of the murder of Henry Marrow, Jr.)

We are also restoring two more Civil Rights-era structures, the Tea House at the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum, and the Southern Railways Train Car Number 1211 (at the North Carolina Transportation Museum), a formerly, legally segregated space, which was desegregated through generations of protest.

We are not there yet, but I am committed, now more than ever to moving us forward.

Because Black Lives do Matter, so do black histories, so do black audiences, so do black landscapes, and so do black lay and academic scholars.

In this spirit, again, it is imperative that we say the names of the African Americans whose lives intersect or intersected with the places and stories we are charged to steward.

Lesson 3: It is also critical that we be intentional about working with African American communities, scholars, institutions, organizations, artists, and vendors.

Once we achieve some of these goals, I pray we all remember one of the most critical lessons history teaches us about racial injustice, and that is this:

Lesson 4: Progress is false comfort without the lifelong, daily vigilance against oppression in any and every form.

In humble witness and steadfast commitment to True Inclusion,

Michelle Lanier

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