

An Open Letter to
Harvard University President Lawrence S. Bacow and
Members of the Harvard Corporation and Board of Overseers,
from Descendants of Louis Agassiz
Re: Tamara Lanier v. Harvard University

As direct descendants of Louis Agassiz, we celebrate many of his groundbreaking contributions to natural science. We also lament the widespread damage he wrought with the theory of polygenism, which he used to promulgate the supposed inferiority of African people. For too many years we have ignored his role in promoting a pseudoscientific justification for white supremacy. We see this as a collective failure to live up to our values of anti-racism and compassion. Now is the time to name, acknowledge and redress the harm done by Louis Agassiz.

In 1850, to support his theory that Africans descended from a different “zone of creation” than did Europeans, and thus were essentially inferior, Agassiz commissioned daguerreotypes of two enslaved people living in South Carolina, Renty and Delia.

We ask Harvard University to relinquish the daguerreotypes of Renty and Delia to their descendants, including Tamara Lanier, who has filed a lawsuit for their release. As enslaved people, Renty and Delia could not consent to be photographed. They were regarded as property, not human beings.

For Harvard to give the daguerreotypes to Ms. Lanier and her family would begin to make amends for its use of the photos as exhibits for the white supremacist theory Agassiz espoused. It is time for Harvard to recognize Renty and Delia as people. The daguerreotypes are, as Ms. Lanier has said, family photos.

At a time when racism is ascendant, from the streets of Charlottesville to the White House, we believe that both individuals and institutions need to take a stand and acknowledge our part in it, past and present.

To claim that Agassiz was merely reflecting the popular ideas of his era would be selling his legacy short. He was a respected public intellectual and an active, influential advocate of racist ideas and policies. As an elite university, Harvard provided Agassiz intellectual legitimacy, and together, Harvard and Agassiz strengthened the myth that what we call “race” is a biological, not social, category. More than any other, this falsehood lays the groundwork for the ongoing subjugation, dehumanization and extraction of wealth from people of African descent.

In 2016, Harvard’s then-president Drew Gilpin Faust said, “Harvard was directly complicit in America’s system of racial bondage from the college’s earliest days....This is our history and our legacy.” Yet as recently as 2017, Harvard again used Renty’s likeness on the cover of a textbook. Does the University want to continue to gain from an image stolen from enslaved people? Until Harvard commits to redress the harm it wrought, complicity will continue to define and mar its legacy. It is our hope that releasing the daguerreotypes will be a first step in a long overdue movement of reckoning and repair.

We stand in solidarity with Ms. Lanier, and urge Harvard to join us.

Signed,

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Ruby Moore-Bloom, Amman, Jordan

George Mead Moore, Oaxaca, México

Rowan Moore Gerety, New York City, New York

Amias Agassiz Moore Gerety, A.B., Harvard, 2002, Washington, D.C.,

Carrick Moore Gerety, A.B., Harvard, 1998, Los Angeles, California,

Quentin Moore, M.F.A., Queens, New York

Thomas Sargent Moore, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Indiana Francesca Christov Moore, Xalapa, México

Faye Shneider, New York City, New York

Honor Moore, Harvard, 1967, New York City, New York

Cressida McKean, Arlington, Virginia

Jenny Reed, Seattle, Washington

Hans Hardisty, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Nicolas Hardisty, Newport, Rhode Island

Rosemary Warburton, Tiverton, Rhode Island

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Theo Moore-Manakas, Washington, D.C.

August Moore-Manakas, Montclair, New Jersey

James Madden, Bozeman, Montana

Henri J Bourneuf, Harvard, 1969, Ipswich, Massachusetts

Thomas Agassiz McKean, Bath New Hampshire and Aberdeen, Scotland

Kate McKean, Oakland, California

Elizabeth Lee McKean, Bath, New Hampshire

Jessie Bourneuf, MBA, Harvard University, 1975, Milton, Massachusetts

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