

Arc of Racial Justice Institute Opening Remarks
Delivered by A&S Dean Patrice Rankine on May 7, 2018

Arc of Racial Justice, of course, refers to a quote attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” It is perhaps a paraphrase of American transcendentalist Theodore Parker’s message on the abolition of slavery. Parker’s words are as follows:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

The interplay between the words of the late 20th century Civil Rights leader, whose efforts led to the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and that of a predecessor 100 years before him, is itself emblematic of the curved path toward revelation, clarity, and truth.

If I might riff a bit on King’s “arc of the moral universe,” *arc* is for me a homonym of another priority we have had in mind over the course of the past several months of planning this Institute; that is *ark*, with a “k”. Whether this calls to mind Noah’s ark, or the chest of a divine covenant, in either case, the image is one of a vessel that holds the promise of a community. In the time that we have spent together over the past few weeks, whether our lunch several weeks ago, our time at the President’s house last week, dinner at Wong Gonzalez, or the trip yesterday to see Athol Fugard’s “Master Harold...and the Boys,” what we are doing is reinforcing a community of teacher-scholars committed to racial and social justice.

Why racial and social justice? Why do the words “diversity and inclusion” not suffice? In a conversation regarding Arc of Racial Justice last week, I stumbled again upon the idea of

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invisibility. The processes that led to the world as we know it have been mostly invisible to us. If we attend or teach at the University of Virginia, Georgetown University, Brown University, and indeed, the University of Richmond, the invisible processes that led to the resources our institutions have, the people they draw, the legacies they perpetuate, these are not front and center, necessarily, in our daily work. The University of Richmond is part of the consortium of Universities Studying Slavery, and I name UVA, Georgetown, and Brown, because they, too, are in the consortium. Take Georgetown. You might know that in 1838, Jesuit leaders sold 272 slaves, a transaction worth \$3.3 million in 2017 currency. This sale allowed the University to remain open and compound its wealth. Once invisible, the histories of our institutions are being made visible, more and more each day. Georgetown University publicly recognizes that, given this legacy, “diversity and inclusion” will not do; something deeper, something calling for justice, is more in order, especially in a city where the broad population is 49% black. Compare that to the Georgetown population, which is 6% black. “Diversity and inclusion” is not enough.

We are in an age where hidden realities are seeing the light of truth. Even at “Master Harold...and the Boys” yesterday, the 1982 play by South African playwright Athol Fugard, which deftly portrays complex relationships between blacks and whites during apartheid, I could not help but think about the invisibility of women, a distant presence in the play. The play, the questions it raises, and even its absences, is so emblematic of all that my co-collaborators and I were thinking of when we were beginning to plan this institute. Shout outs to Amy Howard, Glyn Hughes, Martha Merritt, and more recently, Nicole Maurantonio, who have provided the perfect bridge between theory and practice. I also want to thank my

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Director of Operations and Strategic Initiatives, Kirsten Petrocelli, and my assistant, Bethany Perry, for their work.

For the week, please note that we move through four modalities, beginning today. The first is the self. We all bring experiences, perspectives, learning – and voids of knowledge – to these conversations. An awareness of the self in our conversations will be key. I even asked our guest for today, Dr. Orlando Patterson, to consider and share with us what path led him to a lifelong study of slavery and its aftermath in comparative contexts. Patience, reflection, generosity, and consideration are expectations for the week. Place is the second modality, and in a few minutes, we will make our way to Shockoe Bottom, which was second only to New Orleans as a slave center by 1865. The third modality is our academic disciplines. The conversations even over the last few days have so tickled me because they affirm how the differences between our academic disciplines are assets in our conversations. Bringing those disciplines into counterpoint was one of the chief aims of this institute. A fourth modality, then, is community. We are here to delve deeper into our teaching and research while helping to support each other's work. I am excited to embark on this journey with you and am appreciative of your participation in this Institute.