Dear ACM students,

I write to update you about anti-racism efforts in ACM and to invite you into a dialogue.

Last year, the widespread reckoning about institutional racism confronted me with my own complicity. Neither the outrageous murder of George Floyd nor the urgent calls for justice in its wake were unique or new. I do know that Black people have their lives suspected and policed, including at all levels of our education system where research has clearly shown them to be disproportionately misjudged and streamed into lesser resourced programs. As a white person in a leadership position, I must be accountable for the insufficient attention I have paid to the work we need to do to address anti-Black racism or the racism experienced by Indigenous people and other Persons of Colour. It is only in the last year that I have read, for example, reports such as this one on systemic anti-Black racism in our education system, or books such as Robyn Maynard's *Policing Black Lives* or Sandy Grande's *Red Pedagogy*.

ACM and UTSC have played roles in perpetuating white, colonial knowledge systems to the exclusion of others. When I was an undergraduate theatre student at UTSC in the 1990s in what was then the Department of Humanities, the all-white faculty taught courses focused nearly exclusively on the European, Western tradition. In my first year, I took a full-year class that was mandatory for all students in the Department called "Prologue to the Humanities," which seemed premised on the idea that we couldn't know anything without first reading the Great Classics of European Literature from Homer's Odyssey on down. For four years I carried around Oscar Brockett's *History of Theatre* textbook, which starts with a chapter about "ritual beginnings," ends with chapters about "Asia" and "Africa," and has 17 chapters in between about European theatre history. I learned a lot – but I have also had a lot to unlearn. I need to be self-aware about the narrowness of my own training, background and world-view.

Some progress has been made in what is now our Arts, Culture & Media Department. We now better include the cultural histories and contributions of Black, Indigenous, and other non-Western peoples. In some classes we directly address the legacies of slavery and settler colonialism, the prejudices being baked into digital platforms or algorithms, or racist forms of representation in art and performance. We have hired a half dozen BIPOC faculty in the last three years, although Black and Indigenous faculty remain highly underrepresented. Since the early 2000s, first under the title "Arts in a Pluralist Society," later as "Cultural Pluralism and the Arts," and now under "Equity and Diversity in the Arts" (EDA), we have supported research, programming or residencies supporting diverse artists and advancing critical conversations about equity and diversity. You will have recently heard about our IDEAS Grant and The Modern Day Griot Project. I do not mean to sound defensive in citing such examples – I do so to give proper appreciation to the people who have been working on positive change.

I know there is a lot of work to do and on many fronts. With this in mind, this academic year I organized a series of four 'open table' discussions about anti-racism for staff and faculty. These have been an opportunity to discuss how we would connect with students, what considerations or duties of care we owed our students and one another, what the nature of our listening and priority actions might be. Discussions have been far-ranging, and I still cannot say at this point that I feel like everyone has been sufficiently heard. Nor can I say there is clear consensus about the way forward. One thing, however, is clear: our staff and faculty want to hear from you.

That is my purpose in writing you this letter. I want us to start learning from you about your experience of our programs, about what institutional changes you think are important, about how you want to collaborate with us. We do not wish to burden you with the work that needs to be done, that will be our responsibility. But we do need to know how you wish to be involved, and the key areas that need attention. Before we do that, you deserve some basic assurances from us about how we will make this talking safe and constructive for you. My commitment to you is that we will:

- Hold meetings with or gather feedback from you in a way that protects your anonymity
- Make available appropriate supports or follow-ups to support your wellbeing
- Set up multiple means of soliciting comments, including meetings and surveys
- For meetings, use external facilitators from the EDI, ARCDO or UTSC Dean's offices
- Summarize your shared views anonymously and direct all staff and faculty to read them
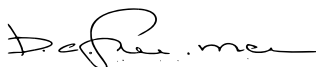- Make your input central to how we design ways to dialogue and work together

Our staff and faculty have communicated to me that they need to hear more from you before they are comfortable setting up specific goals, priorities and timelines for further work. This said, I believe that we cannot invite you into dialogue without an idea about at least my own intentions and goals over some timeframe. So here then is what I would like to see us accomplish, at a minimum, over the next two years. Some of this work could begin in the short-term, and some will require more development and input from you:

- Add a new permanent structure to ACM in the form of a working circle(s) or group(s) with appropriate representation from staff, faculty and students
- Set specific annual goals for effecting an anti-racist agenda, with a transparent process of reporting about progress to the community each year
- Develop new mechanisms and supports for addressing concerns arising in the Department
- Continue curricular reforms supporting anti-racist and decolonizing pedagogies in our courses across ACM programs
- Develop and maintain best practices around safety, care and professional support for difficult or traumatic materials – across our lecture, seminar and studio-based classes
- Fully reform the Equity and Diversity in the Arts initiative to ensure it is pro-actively supporting anti-racist and decolonizing teaching, research and programming
- Make demonstrable further progress in hiring diverse faculty and staff that better reflect the demographics of the student body and wider community

And so, as only a first step, I would propose that we hold an online Zoom conversation, starting perhaps with our excellent ACM student leaders in April. No ACM faculty or staff would be present for this, and it would be led by an external facilitator, UTSC Special Advisor to the Dean on Inclusive Recruitment and Equity Education, Prof. Maydianne Andrade. The agenda for this first meeting might identify areas of greatest concern, or perhaps brainstorm questions students might like to be asked in an anonymous student survey to be conducted later this year. Student leaders will soon receive some prospective dates for this listening session, and an invitation to contribute to the agenda.

ACM is a big, busy, fast-moving place. I am of the view that at least some parts of this work need to move at a different speed. In another book I learned a lot from this year, adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Brown suggests the need that we "move at the speed of trust." I don't take your trust for granted and will work to earn it.

Warmly,

Dr. Barry Freeman
Chair, Department of Arts, Culture & Media