Open Letter from Concerned Faculty

On January 21, 2022, the Harvard Crimson reported that Professor John Comaroff had been placed on unpaid administrative leave for one semester and prohibited from teaching required courses in 2022-23, among other sanctions. Harvard’s Office of Dispute Resolution (ODR) found that Comaroff had “engaged in verbal conduct that violated the FAS Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment Policy and the FAS Professional Conduct Policy.” Although Comaroff had been accused by three students, only one allegation was found by Harvard’s Office of Dispute Resolution to have any merit. Based on the student’s account in the Chronicle of Higher Education (August 25, 2020), the allegation concerned Comaroff’s advice that openly traveling as a lesbian couple in a particular African country where homosexuality is illegal could lead to sexual violence. Since we the undersigned would also feel ethically compelled to offer the same advice to any student conducting research in a country with similar prohibitions, we are perplexed. How can advice intended to protect an advisee from sexual violence be itself construed as sexual harassment? What rules of professional conduct are broken by informing students of the risks of gender-based violence in the multiple locations around the world that do not recognize the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in the same manner as in the United States? As concerned faculty we seek clarification of Harvard’s professional criteria for us as advisors.

We also seek to understand why the FAS did not accept the final results of its own Title IX investigation and opened a second investigation in the Fall of 2021 (Chronicle of Higher Education, January 20, 2022). What are the procedural grounds justifying this action? As faculty members we must know the rules and procedures to which we are subject.

We the undersigned know John Comaroff to be an excellent colleague, advisor and committed university citizen who has for five decades trained and advised hundreds of Ph.D. students of diverse backgrounds, who have subsequently become leaders in universities across the world. We are dismayed by Harvard’s sanctions against him and concerned about its effects on our ability to advise our own students.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Abbate
Paul and Catherine Buttenwieser University Professor, Harvard University

Sven Beckert
Laird Bell Professor of History, Harvard University

Homi Bhabha
Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University

Jacqueline Bhabha
Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Caroline Elkins
Professor of History and African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Paul Farmer
Kolokotrones University Professor, Harvard University
Alejandro de la Fuente  
Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Henry Louis Gates Jr  
Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University

Theodore J. Gilman  
Executive Director, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University

Stephen Greenblatt  
Cogan University Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University

Susan Greenhalgh  
John King & William Cannon Fairbank Research Professor of Chinese Society, Harvard University

Evelynn Hammonds  
Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz Professor of the History of Science,  
Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Michael Herzfeld  
Ernest E. Monrad Research Professor of the Social Sciences Department of Anthropology, Harvard University

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham  
Victor S. Thomas Professor of History and of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Jennifer L. Hochschild  
Henry LaBarre Jayne Professor of Government and Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Jay H. Jasanoff  
Diebold Professor of Indo-European Linguistics and Philology, Harvard University

Maya Jasanoff  
X.D. and Nancy Yang Professor, Coolidge Professor of History, Harvard University

Sheila Jasanoff  
Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies, Harvard Kennedy School

Biodun Jeyifo  
Research Professor of African and African American Studies and of Comparative Literature, Harvard University

David Kennedy  
Manley O. Hudson Professor of Law, Harvard Law School
Duncan Kennedy
Carter Professor of General Jurisprudence Emeritus, Harvard Law School

Randall Kennedy
Michael R. Klein Professor of Law, Harvard Law School

Jamaica Kincaid
Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Michèle Lamont
Professor of Sociology and of African and African American Studies and the Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies, Harvard University

Jill Lepore
David Woods Kemper ’41 Professor of American History, Harvard University

Lisa Mcgirr, Professor of History, Harvard University

Douglas A. Melton
Xander University Professor, Harvard University

Ingrid Monson
Quincy Jones Professor of African American Music
Professor of Music and African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Marcyliena H. Morgan
Ernest E. Monrad Professor of the Social Sciences, Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

John Mugane, Professor of the Practice of African Languages and Cultures, Department of African and African Studies, Harvard University

Carol J. Oja
William Powell Mason Professor of Music, Harvard University

Jacob Olupona
Professor of African and African American Studies and Professor of African Religious Traditions, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University

Eugene Richardson
Assistant Professor of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School

Kay Kaufman Shelemay
G. Gordon Watts Professor of Music and Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University
Mariano Siskind
Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature, Harvard University

Doris Sommer
Ira Jewell Williams, Jr. Professor of Romance Language and Literatures, Harvard University

Diana Sorensen
James F. Rothenberg Professor of Romance Languages & Literatures, and of Comparative Literature, Harvard University

Lucie White
Louis A. Horvitz Professor of Law, Harvard University