

(3) Anne Lewis - ANOTHER PRESTIGIOUS LECTURER CANCELS. August 29,...

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August 29, 2016

Dear Prof. Makalani,

With deep regret, I write to notify you that I must withdraw my acceptance of your kind invitation to deliver a lecture at the University of Texas at Austin this fall. Although I was looking forward to being with you all, I cannot, in good conscience, speak at UT in light of the US District Judge's ruling last week in support of the concealed carry of handguns at UT.

In my work on public health, I have discussed how permissive gun laws have contributed to the staggering rates of homicide in this country. This fact hit very close to home earlier this year when my sister-in-law was murdered in a mass shooting at her workplace in Kansas. Soon after, I witnessed in dismay as friends and colleagues at a university where I previously worked (UCLA) went on lockdown as a gunman killed his professor and then himself. Finally, just two months ago and hours after I delivered a lecture at the Colorado Convention Center, I had to go on lockdown in downtown Denver as a gunman entered a nearby office building and committed another murder-suicide. These tragedies make me extremely concerned about the safety of not only myself, but other faculty, staff and students.

As I have followed developments in Texas, hoping the courts would be more responsive to the urgings of those who are opposed to allowing guns in the classroom, I was disheartened by last week's ruling against faculty. Over the past several years, I have enjoyed giving guest lectures via Skype in two UT Austin graduate classes, heightening my anticipation for this visit. However, given the recent ruling, it is my hope that allies across the country may provide pressure to assist those in Texas who are horrified by permissive gun laws that undermine the educational mission of the university.

While we could simply accept routine campus lockdowns and gun violence as the new normal that we must all just learn to live with, the university is the place where we must be able to discuss and debate the most difficult questions of our time. Like many others, my work grapples with controversial ideas, and it is crucial that we all be able to engage others in a context that encourages participants to take intellectual risks. The current policy deprives members of the university community, including visitors, of this basic educational expectation.

I am still incredibly appreciative of your invitation, and sincerely apologize for the inconvenience my cancellation may cause you and the department. Please feel free to share this letter if it will be helpful in any way.

Sincerely,
Ruha Benjamin

Princeton University

Assistant Professor of African American Studies

Faculty Associate in the Center for Health and Wellbeing; Global Health and Health Policy;

History of Science; Gender and Sexuality Studies; and Department of Sociology