



**PROJECT 21**  
Black Leadership  
Network

June 26, 2020

Mr. David M. Rubenstein, Chairman  
Ms. Deborah F. Rutter, President  
The John F. Kennedy Center  
for the Performing Arts  
2700 F Street NW  
Washington, DC 20566

Dear Mr. Rubenstein and Ms. Rutter:

On behalf of the membership of the Project 21 black leadership network, we are asking you to rescind the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor that was awarded to Tina Fey in 2010.

Ms. Fey recently made arrangements to remove four episodes of the "30 Rock" television series she created, and in which she starred, from the Hulu streaming service because they contained characters in blackface. She has a writing credit for two of those four episodes, proving her foreknowledge and approval of a practice that she now recognizes as "ugliness."

This is bad in itself, but she has not addressed several other racial concerns raised about her comedic devices. Also regarding "30 Rock," Daily Beast entertainment reporter Laura Bradley pointed out the "dueling racial tropes" of the show's two main black characters: the extroverted buffoon Tracy Jordan and well-spoken "Toofer" - whose nickname came from being black and a Harvard graduate. Fey is additionally criticized for putting a character in Asian-mocking yellowface in "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt," another show she created, wrote for and produced. Vox senior culture reporter Alex Abad-Santos has criticized her stereotyping of Asians as "hyper-sexual, and looking for green cards/can't speak English."

We do not seek to "cancel" Ms. Fey for the purpose of political correctness. We do not seek to end her entertainment career. Instead, we are asking you to act to preserve the integrity of the Twain Prize and the Kennedy Center itself.

Quite frankly, Ms. Fey's receipt of the prize in 2010 put her in a class of comedians to which she was, and often still is, inferior. Twain Award creator Mark Krantz said she was not being considered for her "lifetime achievement," and contended she was "at her apex."

Sadly, this appears to have been true. Her post-receipt behavior puts the prestige of the Twain Prize at risk. When asked about racial issues in her shows, she said she was "opting out of apologies" and that her works "need to speak for themselves." Yet she has now reversed herself with her request to purge the "30 Rock" episodes and through her *mea culpa* that "no comedy-loving kid really needs to stumble on these tropes and be stung by their ugliness." It is her newly-announced standard to which she should be held.

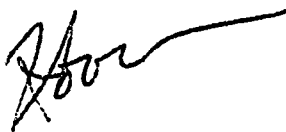
It is our conclusion that the Kennedy Center has not received a proper return on its ill-advised investment in Ms. Fey over the past decade. Given this current controversy, it would be best for the Kennedy Center to rescind her award.

This, as you know, is an action that is not without precedent. The 2009 Twain Prize given to Bill Cosby was rescinded in 2018 due to his improprieties committed outside the field that the Kennedy Center leadership determined "overshadowed" his accomplishments. In this case, Ms. Fey's missteps occurred within the field and thus directly reflect on the honor of the institution.

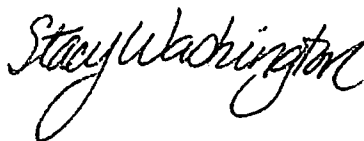
Therefore, we are asking you to make an immediate public statement announcing your intention to rescind Ms. Fey's Twain Prize and convene a meeting of the Kennedy Center Board of Trustees to effect that change at its earliest convenience.

Thank you for this prompt attention to protect the integrity of the Kennedy Center and the Twain Prize.

Sincerely,



Horace Cooper  
Co-Chairman



Stacy Washington  
Co-Chairman



Council Nedd II  
Co-Chairman