


# Heard at Homecoming



Voices from a fall celebration (wait for it) ... like no other.

**AS** with everything else in this pandemic year, Homecoming 2020 was *different*. But what it lacked in on-campus camaraderie, it made up for with a rich and varied slate of content online for alumni.

Billed as *Homecoming@Home* and extending for six days from November 9 to 14 instead of being squeezed into the traditional jam-packed weekend, the all-virtual celebration included upwards of 20 panel discussions on topics including arts and culture, racial and social justice, and the frontiers of medical research and patient care, as well as presentations on Penn's architectural heritage, virtual gallery hops, the University's most unusual "gifts in kind," and more. There was even a football game, with a Saturday rebroadcast of a 2002 contest between Penn and Harvard. (Spoiler alert: Penn won.)

Here are excerpts from a few of the panels, which have been lightly edited for conciseness and clarity. Full videos of all the presentations offered can be found at [www.alumni.upenn.edu](http://www.alumni.upenn.edu). —JP

## The Scholar Artists


*Since 2009, Homecoming has featured a special focus on arts and culture. Launching this year's Arts at Homecoming, Kelly Family Professor of English and Writers House Faculty Director Al Filreis moderated a conversation among several Penn faculty members who combine scholarship and teaching with work as creative artists—which included this exchange among Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History and novelist Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet; Ken Lum, the Marilyn Jordan Taylor Presidential Professor and chair of fine arts in the Weitzman School of Design; and assistant professor of English and poet Simone White, on the challenge of pursuing a creative career given its uncertain economic return, compounded by the pandemic.*

**Kashani-Sabet:** I actually wanted to answer this question, about how you can ensure writing consistently enriches your life when the lack of career stability can make it a drain. I wanted to say a few things about that very quickly: one is, if you're inclined to write, you can never stop writing. If you're inclined to produce creatively, you can never stop doing that because it's suicide, you know? And I think that this moment that we're in right now—I don't know about others, but for me it was crucial that I find quiet moments to think and to write. I don't even know if it was good, or if it is good, or if anyone wants to read it, but it was my survival mode.

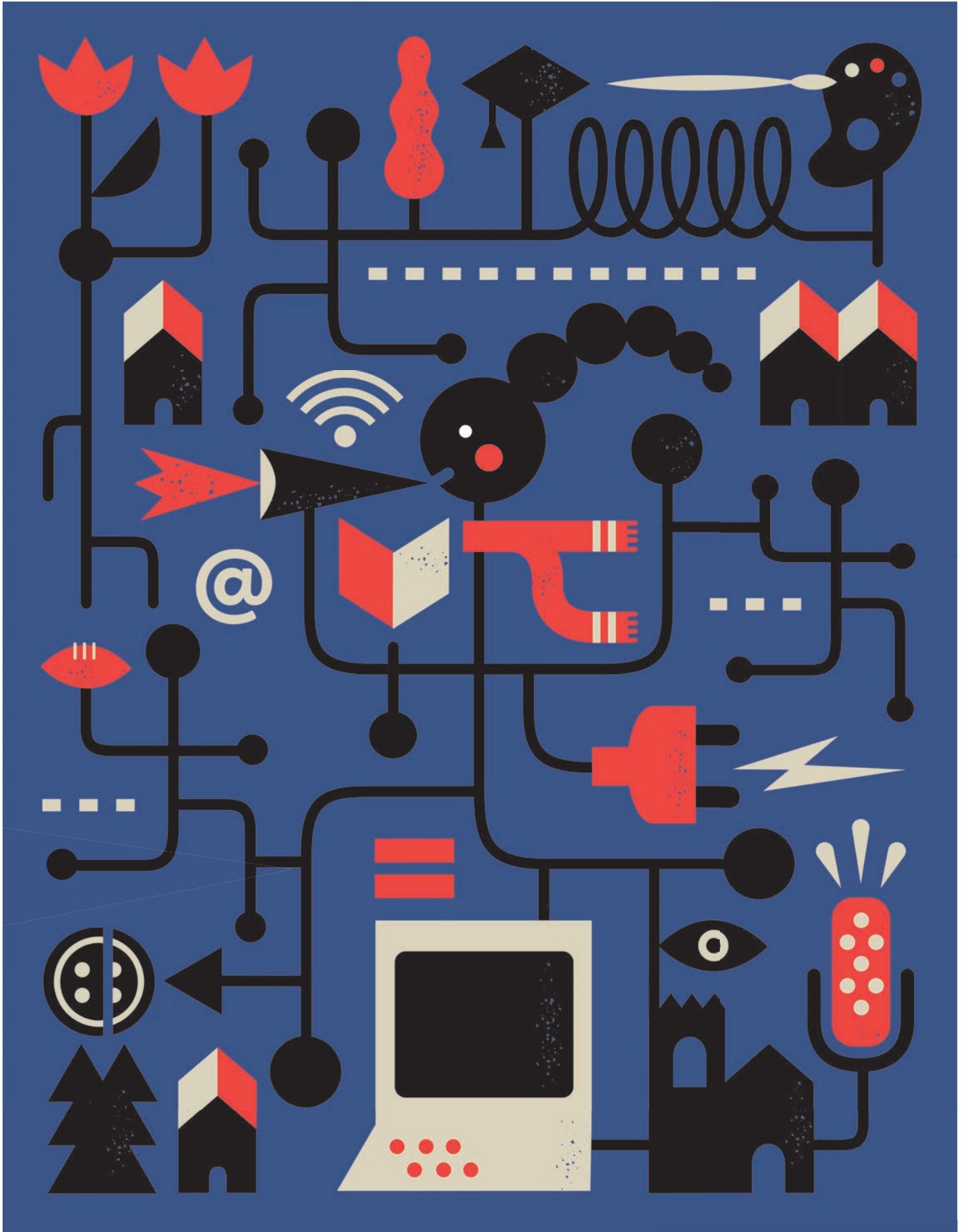
But I don't want to ignore the economics of it, and this is the second part of

what I want to say. For those of us now who have tenured positions, I think we do have an opportunity to "make it count." We can go to the dean's office and say these [creative] endeavors should count [toward tenure and career advancement]. They deserve raises. We should create more opportunities in the university and in the academy, and so that's on us. And I think that, you know, certainly one hopes that the national endowments for the arts and the humanities will be tripled in funding! But we also in our own small ways within our institutions have the power to make it matter, and I think we really have to do that.

**"How can I have enough—enough everything, right?—to do the things that I need to do?"**



**Lum:** Well, it's true that we are living in a social justice moment. A lot of pundits have used that term. But it's a moment that has long been in gestation, so it's not like a moment that just somehow appeared out of nowhere, and COVID-19 is only underlining the consequences of a social order that's been long built on racism, social injustice, and profound inequity. So the coronavirus actually can be a catalyst, I think, for artists to reex-



amine the social environment and the institutions that govern that environment and, in fact, I think it behooves artists to think in that wider political sense, right? And I think also that the crisis of—the confluence of crises, of multiple crises, the monuments crisis and so on—has also made explicit the damage that human cultures have wrought on the world’s environmental footprint as well, so all of these things have kind of converged. I think it’s really important for us to ask the question: What is the global public good that we can offer through our work at this moment? And I think unless we can have some clarity to ourselves in terms of that purpose we will not be very effective artists.

**White:** I want to acknowledge the sort of dark underbelly of not doing the things that you need and want to do. ... Depression is a real thing, “drain” is real. Those are real experiences that people have as they’re struggling to try and figure out what they’re going to do with their lives. One of the things that I’ve tried to think about very seriously, as a person who started their creative work late in life [after working as a lawyer], is that these areas of thinking can’t be separated from each other. How can I have enough—enough everything, right?—to do the things that I need to do? Where do I need to live, what do I need to be looking at, are there people in my life who I need to make closer connections to? This isn’t just about work, it’s also about relationships, it’s—you know, maybe you’re not the person who’s going to get married, I don’t know. That is an economic activity too. And one of the things that creative work can do is to help us to start to think how I want my whole life to look, so that I can think about how I want the world to look. I just really hope that people think about art and art practice as ways of reimagining what the world’s going to look like, as you live in it longer and longer and longer, and are you going to have the emotional resources to stay in it?



## The Urgent Matter of Black Lives

*In this discussion sponsored by the Center for Africana Studies and the Black Alumni Society, moderator Margo Crawford, director of the Center and professor of English, began by asking panelists Mary Frances Berry, the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and professor of history; Dorothy Roberts, the George A. Weiss University Professor of Law and Sociology and the Raymond Pace and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander Professor of Civil Rights; and Tukufu Zuberi, the Lazy Family Professor of Race Relations in the department of sociology, to weigh the promise and potential problems around the “mainstreaming” of the modern abolitionist movement during this year’s protests against police brutality and in support of racial justice and the 2020 election campaign.*

**Roberts:** The promise of it, I think, is the idea of abolition—that the US is a white supremacist nation, still. Its institutions, like police and prisons and, I would add to that, family policing, its healthcare system, its education system—every institution in the United States—we can trace back to slavery. And we can see ways in which the US has continued to maintain these structures of oppression throughout the century even past the abolition of slav-

**“The term gets watered down as it becomes more and more popular and people use it without understanding what it means.”**

ery, and we can talk more about some of the ways in which structural racism is perpetuated. But abolitionists—starting from anti-slavery abolitionists to well-known ones [today] like Angela Davis, Ruthie Gilmore, and others have been creating a movement, a longstanding movement to dismantle completely these punitive carceral institutions that have been used to maintain Black people’s subordination and a racial capitalist system in general, and to instead imagine a radically different society. And of course we want more and more people to understand the meaning of that and to join that movement. I think it’s promising that more and more people are paying attention to abolitionism as a philosophy, as a political strategy, as a vision.

I think the pitfall is that the term gets watered down as it becomes more and more popular and people use it without

understanding what it means. One example is the call to defund police, which is an abolitionist idea—with shrinking the funding for police leading toward dismantling policing as a way of dealing with social problems and conflicts in human needs. But many people use the term either to mean something that's the minimal shifting of resources away from policing without that broader vision, or they are just afraid of that term—so that politicians are afraid to use it. Biden, for example, had to make it clear, "I don't believe in defunding the police!" because it becomes associated with scary radicalism.

**Zuberi:** ... The idea of ending enslavement in the way that it was ended in the United States, the way that it was ended everywhere in the world, comes as a result of this abolitionist tradition. ... If anybody thinks they're for freedom, then they would have to be for abolition—because the other way puts you on a modern Confederate side and that is a side against human existence and against the United States of America, and against us having a possibility for a future. So I think that there is a way that we need to understand that white supremacy is not good for anybody—it's not good for white people, it's



**“We need to understand that white supremacy is not good for anybody.”**

not good for Black people, it's not good for colored people. White supremacy is not good. Maybe it got us to this point, but getting us to this point is now destroying the earth and threatening human civilization, much less threatening Black lives. So I think that this is a fundamental idea. It has long been in our tradition, and its rearticulation and galvanization around



**“We don't demand of politicians anything when we're all talking about going to vote for them.”**

the various iterations of our movement, I think, is the way we need to understand this. But I think we also need to be careful that American democracy and American freedom are most fully articulated around this concept of abolition and that we need to recognize that—because the society is founded *against* abolition, the society is founded in, grounded in, enslavement. So, you want to know how to get beyond that? You get into this abolitionist movement, which is attempting to destroy the continuing existing elements of white supremacy, of the enslavement of freedom, the enslavement of democracy, the enslavement of the possibilities of equality.

**Berry:** After those two eloquent statements, I don't know what I have to say except to do my usual contrarian interjection, which is to point out that the reason why we don't have a policy implemented of abolitionism, in any term—just like we don't have a policy of reparations, we don't have a policy of the whole idea of police reform with qualified immunity, which is part of abolitionism—is because of Black people. Because many Black people are afraid ... and so whenever anybody mentions abolitionism or reform or any of these things, they can always find some Black people to come out and say, “Oh, that's scary. I'd be scared if you did that. Oh please, don't do that to the police. I love the police. I love them coming to my house.” And so are reparations. They say, “I don't need any reparations. Oh, I can do everything myself.” And so every time we get any kind of major reform objectives that we advocate ... there's always

## Merit Awards

The following alumni were selected to receive the Alumni Award of Merit and the Young Alumni Award and will be celebrated at Homecoming 2021 at the Alumni Award of Merit Gala on November 5, 2021.

### Alumni Award of Merit

Judith Bollinger WG'81  
Ghislain Gouraige C'80  
Michael Kowalski W'74  
Clemson Smith Muniz C'79  
John Vosmek C'61

### Young Alumni Award of Merit

Ashley Zampini Ritter Nu'07 GNu'08 Gr'18

somebody who's going to object, and it's not just white people and white supremacists, it's Black people who do so.

The other thing we don't do is, we don't demand of politicians anything when we're all talking about going to vote for them. All we talk about is, “We need to vote, we need to vote,” and I tell my students that Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks and all of those Black women that I knew in the Civil Rights movement did not fight for us to get the vote just so we could “just vote, just vote.” They wanted us to vote like Martin said at the Prayer Pilgrimage in 1957, wanted us to vote so that we can get something—justice, various things we want—or that he said in the missed part of the March on Washington speech, that we came to “cash a check” to give us freedom and justice. So when people are always talking about voting, I say, “Why don't you demand something of these politicians and tell them you're not gonna vote for them unless they do it?” Not one of them in the general election—the two that were there, because we only have two parties, I guess—supported reparations, police reform, or prison abolitionism, or any of the things we want, or any kind of targeted relief for Black people, whether it's economic, political, or otherwise—while they were happy to support such relief for other people without fear or favor. So Black people have to get over being scared, or being, you know, fearful of revolution, really.

## Penn's ImmunoRevolution: Rising Stars and Next-Generation Therapies

*Fulfilling what he called "my childhood dream one day to be a TV talk show host," Abramson Cancer Center Director Robert H. Vonderheide interviewed seven leading researchers and clinicians involved in Penn's standard-setting work in developing immunotherapies for a variety of cancers, as well as diabetes and other diseases. He began with a "topic literally ripped from the headlines," introducing Professor of Medicine Drew Weissman, codeveloper of the messenger RNA (mRNA) technology that made possible the first coronavirus vaccine, announced just days before by Pfizer as having an efficacy of 90 percent. (Soon after, Moderna, which also licensed the Penn patent, announced that its mRNA vaccine was 94.5 percent effective, and Pfizer amended its results to 95 percent.)*

**Vonderheide:** Let's just cut to the chase. Drew, you're a world expert on this. You've been working on coronavirus 24/7 since it became a problem a few months ago. Your laboratory studies were promising that this vaccine would work. Just from your point of view, is this what we've been waiting for? Is this the news we were hoping for?

**Weissman:** I think this is fantastic news. As a vaccinologist, I can't remember ever seeing a respiratory virus vaccine that had 90 percent efficacy. We're usually thinking about flu—that's 40 to 60 percent, and we're happy with that. But this is unbelievable, that's just incredible efficacy, and I think it's probably going to be a wonderful vaccine.

**Vonderheide:** Well, we're all hoping and wishing it the best. Drew, every great breakthrough has its moment when it was created. I want you to take us back to your laboratory around 2005. You were working on the RNA molecule and how it's rigged and how dendritic cells, a certain immune cell, responds to it. Can you tell us back then what you discovered that was eventu-

ally licensed that has now 15 years later turned into a vaccine for coronavirus when we never even imagined it?

**Weissman:** Katie Kariko [then a Penn faculty member and currently senior vice president at BioNTech, which is partnering with Pfizer on its vaccine] and I had been studying the immunology of RNA for many years. RNA has always been thought of as a great way to deliver proteins, but the problem with it is that it's so inflammatory that we often killed the mice—which doesn't work well for a therapeutic. So we studied the immunology and what we found is that by changing one of the bases in the RNA, one of the components of the RNA, with slight modifications we could get rid of that

**"Even before coronavirus, we were ready to go with a bunch of different vaccines."**

immune-activation inflammatory potential. And what was also surprising is that when we did that, we increased the amount of protein that that RNA produced by upwards of a thousand-fold—so not only did we make the RNA safe, we made it 1,000 times more potent.

**Vonderheide:** It's amazing. My understanding is that RNA is ordinarily so inflammatory that you get this immune response that's not productive, but by altering it you're able to then use its properties to actually start an immune response, in this case against coronavirus, and that's incredibly clever. It means, perhaps, Drew, that we can use this for a vaccine for many other indications beyond coronavirus, isn't that right?

**Weissman:** We've got clinical trials already set up and ready to start for genital herpes, influenza, HIV, Norovirus, C. diff., and malaria, and others on the way.

**"Sometimes we say these breakthroughs are 20-year overnight sensations."**

Even before coronavirus, we were ready to go with a bunch of different vaccines.

**Vonderheide:** The material we're talking about here, RNA is different than conventional vaccine. This really would be the first time to use RNA in a commercially available vaccine. Is RNA hard to make, is it hard to manufacture, is it expensive?

**Weissman:** That's probably what attracts pharmaceuticals the most. Making vaccines is very labor intensive, very expensive. Making RNA is a two-step reaction. It's simple. It's one tube to make the RNA, one tube to put it in a lipid particle, and you're done. The cost of RNA vaccines is much less than other vaccines.

**Vonderheide:** And I guess that explains why we were able to go from not even knowing the virus in January to mature clinical trials here being reported in November. It really is unprecedented speed. You know, it reminds me—sometimes we say these breakthroughs are 20-year overnight sensations. ... What do you think the next step from here is? What can we expect next in the news or scientifically?

**Weissman:** I think we're now convinced that the Pfizer vaccine works. The next step is the Moderna vaccine. After that, to me as a clinician, the most important next step is to get it out to the people and to have people take the vaccine. Because it isn't going to do much good if people don't want to take it.

**Vonderheide:** And are you concerned about the safety of this formulation?

**Weissman:** No. The vaccine gives local side effects—people's arms hurt—but other than that, there have been no bad side effects. I think it's a completely safe vaccine.

**Vonderheide:** I share your confidence. RNA is not toxic and has never been shown to be toxic, so another reason to take advantage of it.