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Higher Ed's Toothless Response to the Killing of George Floyd

Statements by college leaders reflect an unholy alchemy of risk management, legal liability, and trustee anxiety

By Jason England and Richard Purcell | June 08, 2020 ✔ PREMIUM

Ed Kashi, VII, Redux

Dotun Adeyemo, 26, just graduated from Rutgers University and was one of the protesters who gathered in Newark, N.J.

What does it mean when an ice-cream company, Ben & Jerry's, can come up with a clearer message of solidarity with protesters and against injustice than a university can? It means that higher education's interest in fighting racism is, at best, superficial and, at worst, cynical.

We are black men on the faculty at the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. On the afternoon of June 2, Rich was among a group of faculty and staff members asked by our dean to brainstorm a written response to the killing of George Floyd and to plan campus programming. Rich was the only black man involved. Jason — a faculty member with a background in civil rights who grew up in a traditionally overpoliced community and was recently racially profiled by the police — wasn't consulted at all. When the statement was released, Rich discovered that the language and editing he had contributed had been

eschewed, disregarded.

Both of us had flashbacks to almost a year ago, when Carnegie Mellon sent out an official statement after the acquittal of Michael Rosfeld, a white police officer in East Pittsburgh who had shot and killed Antwon Rose Jr., a black teenager, as he fled a traffic stop. The statement, released hours after Rosfeld was acquitted, appeared to be more interested in equivocation and risk management than in forcefully denouncing law-enforcement officers' killing a growing list of unarmed black women and men. Any reference to Rose's blackness was omitted, as was the whiteness of the police officer. Words like "criminal justice" (let alone "justice"), "law enforcement," "race," and "racism" never appear.

The most recent statement by our university at least acknowledges the existence of systematic racism, but it, too, never uses the words "police" or "police violence." The statement written to represent Dietrich mentions "police brutality" and acknowledges George Floyd's killing but not his executioners. It gestures toward the existence of a social world but fails to identify the policies or moral and ethical failings that have led to the legitimization of state-sanctioned violence against black people. Nor does it acknowledge that women and men of all races and creeds are occupying streets around the world, risking their lives at the hands of the police and the pandemic to protest injustice and dismantle racist law-enforcement practices. Black people appear in Carnegie Mellon's statements passively, an embodiment of pathos and pain, not as a self-determined community with clear demands for justice.

We now find ourselves in a predicament at once peculiar and familiar: to advocate for our self-interest — our community, our rights, our safety, and our dignity — puts us in a position of jeopardizing our self-interest (our standing with university

administration, and, given that he isn't tenured, Jason's livelihood). We're also left to contemplate our personal and professional value to the university. We seem to exist as props, to be displayed as proof of the university's nobility and virtue —but not as intellectuals to be engaged. How can we maintain integrity and dignity in such a warped bargain? How can we reinforce the psychic and physical well-being of our black students when our collective plight and history are treated as an inconvenience, a reality to get past rather than a tragedy with which to reckon? If a university can't muster the temerity to use accurate and meaningful words, what hope is there for its actions?

We do not wish to tear down our university. We believe in its strength and its ideals. We believe we exist within a community to be challenged and nurtured rather than as a brand to be managed. And this community has responsibilities to its black students and faculty and staff members. University statements and actions should rise to those responsibilities, not undermine them.

If a university can't muster the temerity to use accurate and meaningful words, what credibility is there for its actions?

Official statements about anti-black racism and police brutality are especially important at this moment, because those of us on the side of a humane, just, and democratic society are losing the messaging war. We're being overwhelmed by the strategic manipulation of social media (a Candace Owens monologue about racially motivated police brutality being a myth is currently among the most popular videos on Facebook), and the acquiescence of credible mainstream media (see: the publishing and subsequent rationalizing of Senator Tom Cotton's fascist op-ed in *The New York Times*). More than ever, we need forceful, clear, and uncompromising insights from the best and brightest to combat ahistorical, anti-intellectual, and anti-democratic rhetoric.

Instead, many of the statements released by college leaders about the killing of

George Floyd reflect an unholy alchemy of risk management, legal liability, brand management, and trustee anxiety.

For instance, Lawrence S. Bacow, president of Harvard University, called George Floyd's death "senseless" and condemned racism. But his statement, like many others, failed to acknowledge the demands of protesters and quickly pivoted to platitudes about his own beliefs. The statement from the chancellor of the University of California at San Diego, addressed specifically to black students and staff and faculty members, offers a true master class in the passive voice: "We condemn the racist and unjust rhetoric and actions that have resulted in more attacks on Black Americans." It is as if the same laws that shield the police from prosecution for killing black women and men has been projected into the rules of grammar.

The reign of the passive voice continues in the statement from the leaders of the University of North Carolina. One would never know how George Floyd had died "in the custody of police officers" if there wasn't video evidence of his execution. The chancellor denounces "the actions of the police officers," calls "for transparency and accountability," and quickly turns toward an acknowledgement of student pain and grief with obligatory links to campus services, diversity and inclusion centers, and other forms of self-help.

In the end, these statements seek to reassure concerns and reaffirm values in the abstract. But rarely do they substantively address the dearth of black students, faculty members, and administrators on campuses, or the relative absence of black authors and subjects from our curricula, or the fact that nonblack students can graduate from our institutions no less anti-black than when they arrived. While so many people feigned surprise and offense on behalf of the black birder, Christian Cooper, who is a Harvard grad and hence a Good Black, few seemed particularly struck or bothered that the woman who called the police on him, Amy Cooper, is a Good White, with a graduate degree from the University of Chicago.

Toothless statements from higher-ed leaders speak to a culture that cultivates the Amy Coopers of the world, who become versed in how to talk like a cosmopolitan citizen so they can not only get a job at an investment firm but also better hide the

weapon of racial animus and anti-blackness, to wield only when they think no one is looking.

What we've seen laid bare is the impotence and evasiveness of neoliberal rhetoric, which swings between performances of power and guilt — supplication to the former and self-flagellation in service to the latter. Neoliberal rhetoric appears most saliently in the way colleges talk about structural racism: the list of student, staff, and faculty services — most of them wholly inadequate and underfunded — that are trotted out in hyperlinks. We are asked to tackle collective problems of the public sphere through self-improvement and self-service.

What tends to follow hollow official statements is a cliché slate of programming: focus groups, town halls, anti-racism reading lists, testimonials of hurt, confessions of guilt that accommodate "both sides." These things touch deep nerves and emotional wells in each of us, summoning up sadness, self-righteousness, love, and hate. This is not to minimize the importance of mental health or the push to increase the number of underrepresented minorities in universities. But the number of underrepresented minorities has not grown much at all, especially at our university. There is no measurable progress to be found as a result of these undertakings. It's busywork. It drives home that people will do anything and everything except the right thing. Who is truly being cared for here?

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The right thing is not releasing statements that denounce a single killing while neglecting to connect that killing to the larger circumstances that made it inevitable. The right thing does not encourage us to mourn tragedies rather than attack systemic failings; to perform grief without admitting culpability. All of that is antithetical to the holistic analysis on which the best transformative scholarship hinges. The crises we face today are not isolated tragedies or a passing pandemic. They are manifestations of

deep-seated, continuing injustices that are endemic to American society. The right thing is to acknowledge that truth, and meet it head-on.

Instead, we've seen statements that serve no higher purpose. They are not messages but, to re-appropriate a term from Daniel Boorstin, pseudo-messages. They simply reaffirm the proclivity of college administrators to ape moral and ethical commitment to social concerns while, in fact, keeping the unruly social world at bay. They are written for an audience that bears little relation to the actual student body, staff, and faculty.

It is both right and possible to construct a statement that confronts the glaring issues of social inequity, the legitimization of extrajudicial violence, and the foundation of anti-blackness that props up our country. It is both right and possible to construct a statement that clearly supports the bodily sacrifice of the protesters and the desire for freedom and true democracy by black women and men. Instead, we get exercises in equivocation and dissembling that have little interest in speaking truth to power or in telling us who is responsible for injustice and why. These statements feign care for the community but ask us to deal with structural inequities not through collective action but by directing us to the university's buffet of self-care services.

A key footnote in the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* cited the work of the black psychologist Kenneth Clark, who posited that segregation is as harmful to a majority group as it is to a minority group. In other words, white Americans tend to view integration as an ameliorative measure for blacks, although it was meant to ensure the psychic health of the entire country. What Clark understood was that a collective white superiority complex is also damaging to whites.

Few remember Clark's footnote, and fewer have heeded it. When some whites do wrong, they view themselves and their children as — to quote the headmaster at Jason's private high school— "good kids making bad decisions." But when black people do wrong, they are reaffirming what whites already knew: they were never good in the first place. This mind-set can be taken a step further, to a level so warped that it's difficult to process: When a black person has something awful and

unthinkable happen to her, she gets less basic sympathy than a white person who does something awful and unthinkable. Thus we get calls from the likes of Senator Cotton to turn our military against those who are victimized by injustice.

Too many white people in this country are doggedly and blindly determined to preserve a false sense of innocence — of racism, of classism, of police brutality, of indecency. It's a warped ethical alchemy that leads to mass cognitive dissonance and delusion. Black people pay a heavy price for reminding white people of how savage this society has been toward us. The empty statements by university leaders echo this moral relativism and delusion dressed up as civility and judiciousness.

We're tired of people hiding behind Martin Luther King Jr. quotes, so we do not invoke his words lightly: It is up to university leadership to choose where we go from here: chaos or community? We have a chance — indeed, a duty — to elevate the discourse on race, class, police violence, and human dignity. We absolutely must force conversations about the spirit and philosophy that demean so many blacks and relegate us to the scrap heap in this society. We are devastated to wake up in a world where the university, the institution in which we invest our energy, love, and purpose, cannot rise to meet the very grave moment in which we live.

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