

From “Never a Nigger” to Diversity Champion

by Miles Francisco

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In 2017, for the second year in a row, the University of Oklahoma (OU) was the recipient of the Diversity Champion award given by Insight into Diversity. This award is given to institutions that “exemplify an unyielding commitment to diversity and inclusion throughout their campus communities, across academic programs, and at the highest administrative levels” (“University Community” 2018). A bit of math tells you that 2017 minus two equals 2015, the year that Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) proudly roared the chant heard around the world. Yet in the two years since this incident, this university has been heralded as a beacon for institutional diversity. Take some time to wrap your mind around this feat: from a place that could not get a mention in national news without SAE in the subtext, to Diversity Champion. It is astounding, truly – almost as if the University was just waiting for a racist outbreak from its students to garner national attention and implement this resounding overhaul of inclusion. This incident sparked a rebuttal so strong that it launched the university’s diversity programs beyond all others in this country. Contemplate that. From “Never a Nigger” to Diversity Champion. It is easier to conceive this feat when juxtaposed with Reconstruction. In this analogy, SAE is the Confed-

eracy, the University of Oklahoma the Union, President Boren our Lincoln. This Civil War was much shorter than the real one. President Boren was able to kick SAE off campus and immediately begin the reconstruction of the University of Oklahoma.

Whether the Reconstruction of the United States of America was an utter failure or a success remains a source of polarizing debate today. Some will tell you that President Lincoln, had he not been assassinated, would have been able to bring the country back together under the name of equality. Some will say that Reconstruction successfully brought the southern states back into the Union, fulfilling the original purpose of the period. Others will say that Reconstruction began with Black bodies lying lifeless and ended with Black bodies lying lifeless. To discuss the Civil War in an honest fashion, we must begin with the premise that what Lincoln – and, by expansion, much of the country – was yearning for was not equity for Black slaves; no, the task was to keep the Union intact. It just so happened that slavery was the thing tearing it to shreds. To paint Lincoln as a hero in the story of the Civil War is to embark on the path of the White Man’s Burden. Yes, Lincoln did proclaim emancipation, but not necessarily for the humanitarian reasons your history teachers have led you to believe. In 1876, at an unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument in honor of Lincoln, Frederick Douglass stated that Lincoln was “preeminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country” (Douglass 1876).

Whether Lincoln was a hero may very well be a topic for another day, but Douglass, on the topic, had this to say:

The race to which we belong were not the special objects of his consideration. Knowing this, I concede to you, my white fellow-citizens, a preeminence in this worship at once full and supreme. First, midst, and last, you and yours were the objects of his deepest affection and his most earnest solicitude. You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his stepchildren; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity. To you it especially belongs to sound his praises, to preserve and perpetuate his memory, to multiply his statues, to hang his pictures high upon your walls, and commend his example, for to you he was a great and glorious friend and benefactor. (Douglass 1876)

Praise who you will and as you must, but do not assume that the marginalized will join in the chorus. We will praise those who we know do the work for the people, those who we know truly care for those most vulnerable among us, not those whose main concern is the preservation of a colonized institution. Lincoln's concern was not with equality or ending slavery for the sake of the millions of Blacks in chains; it was with the country and those who were recognized as human. Now we can begin to realize why Reconstruction did not give way to fundamental differences in the ways Blacks were treated: it was never intended to.

Fast forward to 2015 and the task dropped at the feet of President Boren. I cannot speak to the state of diversity on OU's campus prior to 2016, as I was not an OU student, but the university

was never recognized as diversity champion prior to that year. President Boren had to re-patch his tattered university, and that is exactly what he did. Rather than address the systems of power that granted those SAE members the privilege to chant those words, President Boren implemented the Diversity Experience, brought in Jabar Shumate as Vice President, and put a small bandage on a flesh wound. The Diversity Experience is mandatory for first-year and transfer students beginning with the class of 2019. An experience that most students deem excessively long, some even unnecessary. An experience that puts the burden on students to educate total strangers about their identity. An experience with an impossible task: to plant inclusivity into the minds of 18-year old students from varying backgrounds in the span of a few hours.

I would like to make something clear before I carry on: I am in no way attacking Vice President Shumate's efforts to achieve this task, nor anyone working in the University Community office, nor those that manage the Diversity Experience. As stated, they have been given an incredibly unfair burden. I place the blame on the President and others who hold power at this university for circumventing structural problems altogether and giving a few people of color the mission to do the work for the oppressor, something that is seen unfortunately often in the fight for social justice.

We now know that President Lincoln never sought fair treatment for Blacks, never prayed for the day that a Black man (let alone a Black woman) and himself would be given those self-evident truths. Do we know if President Boren was aware that what he did was not enough? Does he himself know that it was not enough? Does he believe that

it was adequate, that bringing in Vice President Shumate to promote diversity university-wide was enough? The answers hinge on who holds the power.

There is a certain inevitability of White supremacy at historically White institutions like the University of Oklahoma. Just as was the case with our country, a short period of reconstruction would not be enough to dismantle a system of oppression that is as natural to the United States' state of being as is war. I want to define White supremacy before carrying forward, because it, like other terms centered around race, seems to be a source of confusion for many. In the words of critical race theorist Frances Lee Ansley:

By 'white supremacy' I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Vann 2017)

This definition does a good job of encompassing the layers of White supremacy. While it may seem rather general at first glance, it is in fact quite precise and speaks to realities in which we live. To begin, Ansley refuses to abide by the amnesia often seen in discussions about race relations in this country. White supremacy is not just the air around Richard Spencer and his followers; a White supremacist is not just the man caught tying a noose around a poplar tree. We must begin this

conversation from the premise that to be a White supremacist, to participate in this racist system, one does not have to actively engage in overtly racist actions. It has become far easier today to classify racists only as those at Charlottesville, but we have to come to terms with the fact that they are the minority – that most Americans do not wish for their racism to be publicized. Which is not to say that racism is dead, but that Whiteness as a malleable creation has transformed into a much less obvious way of keeping people of color subservient. It is this system that has made it so that at every turn, in every nook of power, there is a White face waiting, even when a “diverse pool of candidates” was considered.

With this definition in mind, let us examine the University of Oklahoma. President Boren, the head of the school, is a White, affluent, able-bodied, cisgender, straight-identified man. The Board of Regents, where the rest of any meaningful power resides, includes eight members, six of whom align with Boren's identity, the other two White women, and all of whom have the common trait of being wealthy. To further cement this lineage of Whiteness, Boren's successor, James L. Gallogly, also aligns with this identity. This is the top of the power structure of the University of Oklahoma, all of which does nothing to combat White supremacy. There is hardly a sign of diversity or inclusion among those who hold the power at the University of Oklahoma. Those that have the clout to alter the reality of justice and equity on this campus chose to tokenize a large minority community by bringing in Jabar Shumate. It is difficult for an objective observer to look at this action as little more than a public relations fix.

I write this critique of my university not because I believe any power-bearing White person here actually believes I am inferior in any draconian type of way, but because they do not and thus we label them as nice, liberal White folk and move on. As if actually yearning for my lynching is the only indicator of White supremacy. As if spitting at my Black body on my way to class is the only indicator of White supremacy. No, I fear that something much scarier seen in the actions of my university after the SAE incident has driven many to believe that this institution is worthy of an award just a year after racist overtones were unearthed. It is my consciousness of the reality of this country, of this system, that drives me to fear, because I am skeptical of the end results. I am skeptical that any fundamental change will come of a place that so readily accepts an award even after failing to address the omnipresent elephant in the room.

The response to "Never a Nigger" is the epitome of what Dafina-Lazarus Stewart calls the "language of appeasement." Stewart posits that diversity and inclusion tactics ask the wrong questions and yearn for answers that mirror change on a rudimentary level, but do not enact justice. It is naming Jabar Shumate Vice President and putting him in charge of all things non-White, to make these things more visible to the media, so we can get back in the good graces of the nation. It worked. I can only speculate as to the intentions of President Boren. But his actions tell me that he was not looking for substantive change, or even modest change, but rather a fix to the image of his university. I see Whiteness reshaped at OU, remaining in the background, continuing to call the shots and ensuring that their stranglehold on power never

ceases. All the while, students, faculty, and staff who yearn for equity and justice have been played for the fool. Which is not to say that these individuals believe racism has suddenly been eradicated from the university, but rather that they have been silenced by a couple of diversity championships.

Jackynicole Eyocko is a former student activist who was at OU during the SAE outburst and was a member of OU Unheard, the group that played a crucial role in pressuring the university's hierarchy into action. She recently looked back at the role she and her fellow activists played in ensuing change. Eyocko, reflecting on this time at OU, states that "many of us did not know what we were doing or what we wanted to get out of our collective fight, but what was immanent was our agency – especially since this 'grand' example of racism occurred during the height of the BLM movement." She felt that this time was bigger than her, bigger than the usual sense of being a Black person at university, here to study and graduate. She felt an obligation to speak up, and she did. Regarding her path to OU Unheard and the work that came before, she says "we never 'became' student activists. We were academic activists during most of [our] university lectures when we had to check folks, including professors." This is a reality for many students of color: They find themselves in classrooms not built for them, chairs not malleable to their existence, institutions unwilling to do the fundamental work to ensure their survival, so they do the work themselves.

A professor who did not feel he had the liberty to be named in this essay recalled his experience with the faculty diversity council and his work on equity issues at OU as a whole. He quickly came

to the realization that President Boren responded more readily to student outcry than to faculty members. In working on the institutional plan for diversity and inclusion efforts at the university, this professor saw much of the same appeasement that I see from my perspective. When he and other faculty members suggested initiatives to address systemic problems, their proposals were often dismissed as remedying problems that were already addressed by existing services, or forced into a framework for addressing technical rather than social or political problems. One specific example he gave was the matter of student food insecurity, which those in power categorized as something already answered through financial aid. When he and other like-minded faculty members proposed a climate survey to track the state of the diversity programs in place and students' reaction to them, it was not brought about. Why initial calls for a climate survey were not heeded is something I can answer based only on conjecture: maybe out of fear as to what the results would bring to light; possibly a fear that this survey would require stronger programs that actually pinpointed the system, rather than who is in the room. Which is precisely the problem with diversity programs in general. Too often "diversity" simply addresses phenotypical traits in order to make an institution appear more welcoming for students who do not fit the mold of what Audre Lorde calls the "mythical norm." Possibly the sentiment was that these things coming so shortly after "Never a Nigger" would mean that little has changed in students' mindset. Efforts to discuss housing precarity, economic justice for students, and other systemic matters were an awkward fit for the technocratic planning

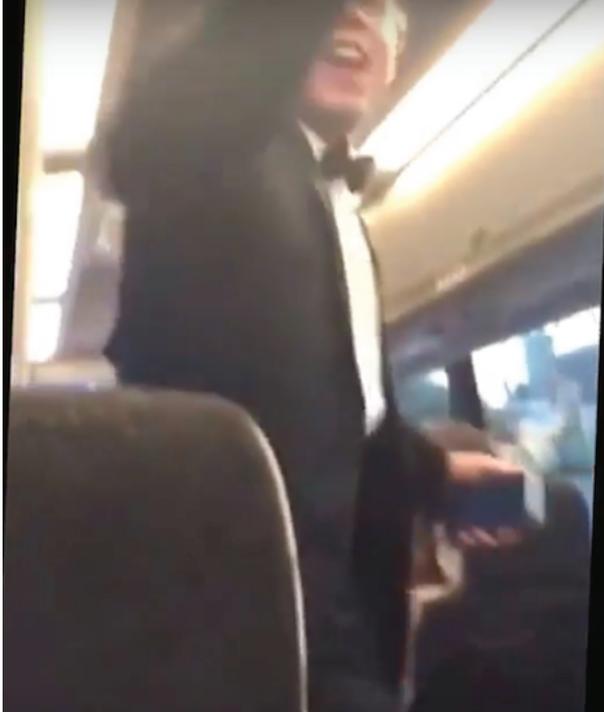
process. Those responsible for institutional diversity planning may not be to blame for this inaction on real systemic work. Some in the administration may fear a backlash from prominent stakeholders. Every person working on equity concerns at this university must be thoroughly aware of the stakeholders who play a role in how far these diversity endeavors can progress. One can speculate that a little too much change may run off the top donors to this university, which is no good for all parties involved.

Eyocko, whose group OU Unheard is an example of the student outcry forcing Boren's ear, spoke about her feelings about the award given to OU just a year later, saying that this feat "ridicules the struggle borne by the hundreds of thousands of black people who have been attending the university since they were allowed to. It is a mockery of 60 years of struggle." She noted that the only institutional changes seen by her and her peers was the hiring of Shumate, adding that no award should be given until an institution "can quantify their 'diversity' initiatives," as would have been the case if a climate survey had been undertaken, as the aforementioned professor advocated. Eyocko feels that the very students who applied the pressure to bring a change were shunted out of the process, rather than becoming part of it by being asked whether they, as students of color directly affected by racist fraternities running privileged on this campus, felt that their campus had become more inclusive. Eyocko says she did not feel "OU did a good job of entering both the fraternity and sorority space." That the diversity training was not mandated on a national level shows that the University and Interfraternity Council differentiated

between "what is institutional and what is one bad apple" and, by doing so, missed a true opportunity to affect millions.

It is the actions of a few fraternity boys that started all of this, so why hasn't it ended with them? It may be that the existential threat of powerful individuals is too large a Goliath to even attempt a battle with. They are President Boren. They are the Board of Regents. They are the very face of White supremacy in all its horror; they are power.

The individuals who are truly worthy of an award do the tireless, daily, often unrecognized work of making this university more open for all students, and being named Diversity Champion is not the reason they do this work. They know the work they do is crucial for the survival and eventual liberation of the masses. Yet this institution proudly flaunts its award while doing little or



*"There will never be a ni**** SAE....You can hang him from a tree / But he'll never sign with me / There will never be a ni**** SAE"*

nothing to address the privilege, the system that makes this institution a welcoming home to White Supremacy.

America (post 1492) and the University of Oklahoma are historically White institutions, with roots grounded in White supremacy, that have upheld this systemic supremacy because their leaders failed to dismantle the systems whose continued existence relies on them. The slogan of this university is an ode to the obliviousness of Whiteness and the horror it has inflicted on so many. The words "boomer sooner" roll so easily off the tongues of thousands every day without a second thought about the facts that the very land on which our university resides is stolen land. These words meant the genocide of Indigenous peoples in this state. Maybe addressing the first words seen by aspiring students would be a step in the right direction towards a sliver of symbolic justice for all the wrong done in the name of liberty.

If the university's response to the SAE incident, scandal - whatever name one deems appropriate - did not bring any change to the institution, to those that need diversity training the most, then what was it all for? To appease. To appease the few faculty of color at the University of Oklahoma rather than improve their numbers and tenure status; to appease the small population of students of color rather than significantly increase their number; to make members of these groups feel moderately safe, or at least provide ample safe spaces, rather than to make the larger university environment actually safe for them. To appease the national media, to show that this was just a blemish, that "Never a Nigger" was just a group of foolish, intoxicated kids chanting something they did not

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know the meaning of. If appeasement was the goal, we should call it what it is: the upholding of White supremacy at this colonized institution. Was any other outcome to be expected?

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