

Starting with the Promises: Moving from Inspirational Words to Institutional Action in Addressing Systemic Racism

Brooke Coley
Arizona State University
Mesa, AZ
bccoley@asu.edu

James Holly, Jr.
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI
jhollyjr@umich.edu

Abstract— This special session aims to examine engineering departmental/program level public statements in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic and American racism in the year 2020 (RACISM-20). Specifically, this session will catalyze a critical discourse regarding the cultivation of anti-racist engineering environments through considering the responses to a crucial national moment as reflective of the initial institutional positioning [1]. The intended audience for this special session includes all stakeholders in the engineering ecosystem to thoroughly consider institutions and the associated messaging conveyed through their anti-racist response statements. A specific focus is on members of engineering and computer science higher education environments inclusive of students, staff, faculty and administrators for whom the work has implications in both classroom and research environments. The hope is to have an audience diverse in institutional representation, geographical location, disciplinary area, status/rank, and identities. This session invites all to join an interactive discussion that addresses the role of the institutional response and accountability in seeding anti-racist endeavors [2].

Keywords—*institutional statements, systemic racism, Blacks in engineering, anti-racist environments, policy*

I. MOTIVATION

Much research is emerging to understand the lived experience of navigating two pandemics. However, less research has focused on engineering institutions in terms of their role in advancing anti-racist endeavors. To effectuate real change, we must start with addressing the promises declaring commitments to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion, though no shared understanding of these terms exists. This special session will utilize a discourse analysis approach to help participants a) reflect on the necessity and limitations of institutional statements, and b) critically review what has been stated (and not stated) in the statements released by engineering institutions during the year 2020.

II. NOVELTY OF SESSION

On May 25, 2020, the world witnessed the life of a Black man, George Floyd, escape his body at the hands of a criminal police murder. Witnessing this wrongful death, in combination with other widely reported Black murders, reignited a national movement combating anti-Black racism, including a nationwide dialogue about the state of systemic racism as some citizens navigated simultaneous pandemics [3]. As a part of the national discourse regarding the disproportionately fatal effects on Black people of the novel Coronavirus and widespread

extrajudicial murders, institutions, and specifically, engineering programs began to release statements against systemic racism and anti-Blackness. These statements dovetail decades of initiatives focused on broadening participation of Black Americans in engineering and computer science, even as the quantity of Black people in these fields and the quality of their experience continues to decline. This special session will promote an interactive dialogue examining engineering affiliated institutional responses as a means of understanding the institutional messaging, positioning, plans for action, and accountability in advancing anti-racist endeavors.

Many of the statements have expressed positions of solidarity with the Black community and stated new commitments to change (Warren, 2020). However, for many, including Black students, staff and faculty, there is uncertainty as to what will result from the statements and question as to whether they will serve as politically strategic placeholders for action, or merely empty words. *Starting with the Promises* is a special session to digest the written word as acknowledgement and institutional blueprint for navigating anti-Black racism. This session will investigate the language used, the people acknowledged, the issues raised and the actions to be taken in efforts to collectively synthesize where things are at the baseline.

The proliferation of public statements following the murder of George Floyd caused many Americans to respond with a range of emotions, including surprise, optimism, and even cynicism. In some ways these written declarations provided by corporate leaders [4], educational institutions [5], and others [6] satisfied a yearning for acknowledgement of the barbaric murders law enforcement officers committed against Black people and captured on video. Yet, these statements offer an intriguing paradox as these institutions have long tolerated racial violence [7] and even perpetuated and/or benefitted from such. Now, it is the national charge for such institutions to articulate strong condemnations of racial violence against Black people accompanied with commitments to counteracting such occurrences. We present this workshop as a point of critical reflection on the purpose and usefulness of public statements, particularly those following tragic events like extrajudicial killings of Black people. When leaders, individuals or institutions make public statements, it signals

appreciation of the severe trauma these events can incite. However, such efforts to demonstrate sympathy can be overshadowed by superficial commentary and can even become harmful when shallow promises or unsubstantiated commitments are made. To be clear, the importance of giving attention to the racial trauma and experiences of Black people is helpful for *all* people to have an accurate understanding of the social problems pervasive in our shared society. Likewise, it is harmful to *all* people when awareness of anti-Blackness lacks appropriate redress. We are promoting careful consideration in crafting public statements as well as in embracing communal responsibility to ensure these statements fulfill their intended purpose, whatever that may be. We do not mean to imply public statements are imperative, though we understand the politics of silence [8]. Rather, this work encouraged thoughtfulness to not only what is stated, but how it is stated, and how it is followed with action [9].

III. CONTEXTUALIZING THE DISCOURSE AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

The historicity of Black people within institutions of higher education, and engineering in particular, is fraught with systemic exclusion and marginalization [10-11]. Thus, it appears disingenuous to make a public statement denouncing anti-Black violence that has been exposed across the nation without mention of the anti-Black violence that is local to the institution being represented by the statement. This conflict of interest is especially perplexing at historically White institutions [12], making this analytical workshop necessary to go beyond fault-finding to developing genuinely transformative strategies for mitigating anti-Blackness in all its forms. Moreover, the catastrophic event that instigated so many public statements (i.e., murder of George Floyd) was not an anomalous circumstance and should be recognized as such [13-14]. In fact, since 2012, there has been an abundance of video recorded instances of law enforcement officers using excessive force to brutalize and kill Black people, even when the victims were expressing distress. Though the details leading to the death of George Floyd were in some ways particular to this unfortunate situation, the context in which it all transpired was not. We assert the need to contextualize the incident(s) being discussed in these public statements in the same way one would provide background information within a journal manuscript to characterize the current contribution in relation to prior literature. Such is paramount to demonstrate the magnitude of the issue being addressed.

This prior information is helpful in deciding appropriate future action that will avoid repetitive and futile efforts. Decontextualization is a prominent issue in engineering [15], which prevents comprehensive understanding of the ways Black people are abused during our academic pursuits or within the industry. Consequently, it is difficult to identify the omnipresent cultural norms and practices that correlate the loss of human life (i.e., murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, among others) in American society with the loss of human potential [2] in American engineering. Scholars have long delineated the ways Black people have

endured forms of symbolic violence [16] and structural disenfranchisement in engineering education [17-18] from its founding to modernity [19-20]. We advocate for contextualization of relevant harm to Black people such that any future actions are truly progressive.

As we examine the public statements put forth by engineering department/program leaders, we are mindful of the impact these statements have on Black students, staff, faculty, and administrators within these engineering communities. Black people are undoubtedly the individuals most affected by these statements as the statements were prompted by the mass witnessing of a Black man being murdered amid a flurry of Black death due to COVID-19 overlapping with RACISM-20. The resulting national discourse on anti-Black racism explicitly laid focus on the harmful experiences Black people endure daily. Yet, the statements from engineering leaders, be it explicitly or implicitly, situate this suffering within engineering education and practice. Therefore, the theoretical framework used in this work is one that explicates the peculiar psychological realities Black people must navigate in educational and/or academic contexts. Boykin's (1986) Triple Quandary theory was conceived to express the "three realms of experience" Black Americans must maneuver, which are "the mainstream, the African-rooted Black culture, and the status of an oppressed minority" (p. 59) [21]. The use of 'mainstream' refers to European American, or White, cultural norms that are treated as the default way of knowing, being, and doing informed by values, worldviews, and styles rooted in European ancestry. Similarly, descendants of enslaved Africans have established values, worldviews, and styles that are rooted in (various) African traditions, intertwined with iterations borne out of the experience of Black people in the United States. The status of an oppressed minority characterizes the ways Black Americans have been dehumanized through social and political arrangements, suggesting we are marginalized according to our demographic representation *and* racialized classification as inferior to White people. As these three realms cannot be disaggregated, they coalesce into a hegemonic socialization process for Black students and Black people, in general. Though Boykin's theory was applied to the study of Black children, the three realms of experience remain true for Black people in engineering education making it relevant for framing this work. Additionally, this framework is relevant for studying public statements as they were written and disseminated by administrators, educators and/or professionals within engineering, which is a part of, and/or has implications on, the learning experiences of Black students, staff, faculty, and administrators within these engineering communities.

IV. AUDIENCE

All are heavily encouraged to attend this special session as all members of the engineering ecosystem are a part of identification and execution of solutions to combat anti-Black racism – from students, faculty, and administrators to industry members. We do not take lightly the courage required to make a public statement following tragic events; nonetheless, as Black scholars and engineering education researchers, we

desire statements that do more than trivially acknowledge tragic anti-Black incidents. We are offering this workshop to provide insight on how we interpret these statements as Black people (on behalf of ourselves), and to assist our academic community in leveraging moments of national attention as opportunities to cultivate transformative empathy. Furthermore, we desire to catalyze colleagues to move from critical reflection to critical action. This session will be of particular interest to those individuals interested in understanding and combatting systemic racism.

V. SESSION GOALS

The willingness of engineering leaders to break tradition by making pronouncements on anti-Black violence is appreciated; however, institutional silence has persisted as the number of Black lives lost has steadily increased. The statements are long overdue, and yet, must be critically examined to determine effectiveness as a statement of action or ineffectiveness as a commitment of empty words. One approach to creating strong public statements, which will be one of several important foci of this workshop, is in crafting multidimensional statements which explicitly include commitment(s), actionable elements, and accountability measures. We do not intend on telling people what to do nor evaluate the quality of what people decide is feasible in this workshop. Rather we will use examples of released statements to facilitate awareness of the critical components effective statements contain. We will also address departmental/program characteristics which should be uniquely considered in developing statements or responses to national and traumatic events. This department/program-level examination will include recommendations to communicate with members of the department/program's Black community and assessing their articulated needs and desires, prioritizing this information, and then determining the most effective course(s) of action. As such, we have established six primary objectives for the session. We are hopeful these explicit goals will be realized across the participants and translated back to engineering departments and programs across the country and beyond. Specifically, we anticipate that through this workshop we will:

1. Present the engineering community with a range of statements responsive to anti-Black racism demonstrating a range of dimensionality—framed in dimensions of commitment, action and accountability.
2. Create an awareness of the power and/or policy implicit in institutional statements.
3. Instigate critique of anti-racist statements, engineering communications, and public discourse.
4. Prompt critical reflection of the relevance of responses to national events.
5. Center the experiences of Black people, and specifically, Black students, faculty and staff in academic engineering environments.

6. Raise awareness of the importance of critical consideration of how such statements effect the communities targeted and/or impacted.

VI. DESIGN OF THE SESSION

This 80-minute, interactive session will be broken into five sections: (1) introduction to the facilitators and topic (5 minutes); (2) establishing individual and group positionality via interactive polls (10 minutes); (3) participants will be placed into groups (6-8 individuals per group) with each being assigned an example institutional response statement (20 minutes); (4) groups will report out to larger group on their assigned institutional response statement (15 minutes); (5) synthesizing the information to identify the implications of the promises and contextualizing a roadmap for action and accountability (30 minutes). It is important that reflection on the positionality of individuals be integrated into the beginning of the session. Though the interactive polls will be shared instantaneously and anonymously, the answers and representation of the various positions in the room are healthy and necessary to situate the discourse. The statements studied in the groups will represent real responses issued from institutions during the year 2020-2021. We believe each individual first having context of their understanding, bias and awareness in context to the topic at large and the greater group will facilitate the activity having the greatest potential to be transformative.

This activity will seek to create awareness of a unique experience of a particular group of people during the year 2020—Black students, faculty and staff—while contextualizing institutional responses and the inequitable impact the pandemics have had on communities of color. This special session will focus on institutional responses to anti-Black racism as a means of understanding institutional intentions for actionable change in establishing anti-racist engineering environments.

AUTHOR BIOS

Dr. Brooke Coley is an assistant professor of engineering at Arizona State University and principal investigator of the Shifting Perceptions, Attitudes, and Cultures in Engineering (SPACE) Lab, which aspires to elevate the experiences of marginalized populations, dismantle systemic injustices, and transform the way inclusion is cultivated in engineering.

Dr. James Holly, Jr. is a Black man, native Detroit, educator, and researcher. After earning his bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering from Tuskegee University, his work has focused on mitigating anti-Blackness in P-20 STEM education which led to his dissertation on studying a race-conscious approach to teaching engineering to Black male youth.

REFERENCES

- [1] L. L. Long, III. "Toward an antiracist engineering classroom for 2020 and beyond: A starter kit." *Journal of Engineering Education*, 109(4), 636-639, 2020.
- [2] E. O. McGee. "Interrogating structural racism in STEM higher education." *Educational Researcher*, 49(9), 633-644, 2020.
- [3] L. Voytko. "America's 'Two Deadly Viruses'—Racism And Covid-19—Go Viral Among Outraged Twitter Users." *Forbes*, May 31, 2020.
- [4] R. Feloni & Y. George. "These are the corporate responses to the George Floyd protests that stand out." *Just Capital*. <https://justcapital.com/news/notable-corporate-responses-to-the-george-floyd-protests/>, June 30, 2020.
- [5] L. Burke. "College leaders respond to death of George Floyd," *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/06/01/college-leaders-respond-death-george-floyd>, June 1, 2021.
- [6] A. Greenberger & T. Solomon. "Read statements from major U.S. museums about the George Floyd protests." *Art News*. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/museums-statements-george-floyd-protests-1202689578/>, June 2, 2020.
- [7] J. R. Taylor. "A history of tolerance for violence has laid the groundwork for injustice today." *American Bar Association*. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/black-to-the-future/tolerance-for-violence/, May 16, 2019.
- [8] K. Crenshaw. "Resisting Whiteness' rhetorical silence." *Western Journal of Communication*, 61, 253–278, 1997.
- [9] L. McKenzie. "Words matter for college presidents, but so will actions." *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/08/searching-meaningful-response-college-leaders-killing-george-floyd>, June 8, 2020.
- [10] T. E. Dancy, K. T. Edwards & J. E. Davis. "Historically white universities and plantation politics: Anti-Blackness and higher education in the Black Lives Matter era." *Urban Education*, 53(2), 176-195, 2018.
- [11] D. E. Wharton. "A struggle worthy of note the engineering and technological education of Black Americans." *Greenwood Press*, 1992.
- [12] C. S. Wilder. "Ebony & ivy: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities." *Bloomsbury Press*.
- [13] P. Butler. *Chokehold: Policing Black men*. The New Press.
- [14] M. L. Hill. "Nobody: Casualties of America's war on the vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and beyond." *Atria Book*, 2016.
- [15] E. A. Cech. "The (mis)framing of social justice: Why ideologies of depoliticization and meritocracy hinder engineers' ability to think about social injustices." In J. Lucena (Ed.), *Engineering education for social justice: Critical explorations and opportunities* (pp. 67–84). Heidelberg, Germany: Springer Netherlands, 2013.
- [16] E. Bonilla-Silva. "The linguistics of color-blind racism: How to talk nasty about blacks without sounding 'racist'." *Critical Sociology*, 28(1-2), 41-64, 2002.
- [17] B. A. Burt, K. L. Williams, & W. A. Smith. "Into the storm: Ecological and sociological impediments to Black males' persistence in engineering graduate programs." *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(5), 965-1006, 2018.
- [18] J. L. Bush. (2013). "*The persistence of Black women in engineering: A phenomenological study*." [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Wilkes University, 2013.
- [19] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. "The Impacts of Racism and Bias on Black People Pursuing Careers in Science, Engineering, and Medicine: Proceedings of a Workshop." *National Academies Press*, 2020.
- [20] A. Slaton. "Race, rigor, and selectivity in U. S. engineering: The history of an occupational color line." *Harvard University Press*, 2010.
- [21] A. W. Boykin. "The triple quandary and the schooling of Afro-American children." In U. Neisser (Ed.), *The School achievement of minority children: New perspectives* (pp. 57-92). Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986.