

Statement to the Committee on the Events of October 29, 2013
written and delivered by Lydia Kelow-Bennett and Brandy Monk-Payton

Good evening.

We are here as the leadership of the Nabrit BGSA to make a statement on behalf of the Samuel M. Nabrit Black Graduate Student Association. This statement represents only the opinion of Brandy Monk-Payton and Lydia Kelow-Bennett, and does not propose to speak on behalf of all of the Nabrit members nor on behalf of all graduate students of color at this university. But we do believe that as an organization committed to supporting underrepresented students at Brown, we have something to say.

Declaration and Statement of Impact

As people of color, as LGBTQ people, as women, as international students, as people from low income backgrounds, as men and women who are gender non-conforming, as people from marginalized communities, we are deeply acquainted with dehumanization. For many of us from aggrieved communities, this acquaintance with dehumanization is a story that runs through our history and into our present. Dehumanization is not something that we talk about as only having happened in the past. It also happens in profound and disturbing ways in the present. I have heard and experienced enough stories of institutional, communal and individual dehumanization from my short time here at Brown to publish a book the school would certainly not be proud of.

Dehumanization is the process by which those with power mark those people and communities that they do not wish to share power with. Dehumanization is at the core of any relationship that is held through power and force rather than through mutual respect and a desire to understand. It is the enemy which Brown University should be most concerned about, and the process that Brown should be most aware of, if as an institution it intends to create a community that is truly democratic and committed to serving all of its members.

As diverse people, we are intimately acquainted with the messiness of community. In my estimation, Brown University, including the Corporation, and the administration, does not fully understand, or accept, how messy a truly diverse, democratic, and healthy community actually is. In my estimation, Brown University is mostly concerned with its national reputation, with how it appears to the powerful people in the U.S. and around the world. By default, then, it is against the university's core motivations to encourage a robust democratic community on campus. Because democracy is very, very messy.

This past week has been one of the most exciting weeks for creating a truly democratic community at Brown University. Multiple aggrieved groups and individuals have come forward to express concern about conditions here at the university. But most concerning to me has been the university's response to these various actions and protests. Control, contain, and reframe was the strategy the institution used in October to deal with the Ray Kelly protests, and it is the

strategy now being used to address the most recent concerns that students have brought through protests that have been nonviolent, acceptable, creative, and bold.

As diverse people, we are also deeply acquainted with those in power using our words, our histories, and others in our communities against us and against our goals. President Paxson's letter after the Ray Kelly event, invoking Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, is a prime example of such a use of power. This strategic languaging--attempting to shame antiracist activists with a misconstrued version of events from their history--is exactly the type of institutional behavior that makes people of color and students of difference in general feel dehumanized, devalued, not listened to, and threatened by the institution of Brown University.

I could go on. I could name for you all of the women of color faculty members who did not receive tenure at this institution because of intersectional racism and sexism. I could point out that Brown provides no operational financial support to Nabrit, which is currently the only graduate student of color association on the campus that is not discipline specific. I could point to the fact that the only process by which graduate students of color can connect with one another--through Super Monday--has recently eliminated the majority of the students of color who come to this campus by making the program unavailable to MA students, and has never included international students. Apparently, since MA students are not here for as long as Ph.D. students, they are not a good investment for this money. And international students of color, who face tremendous racism when they come to the U.S., should have this and many other opportunities to connect with people of color who are already here. I can point to every single department that has that one, or two, students of color in a cohort every other year, and one tenured faculty member of color, but tells people they are committed to diversity. I could recall a thousand conversations with faculty members in classes, where students are told that because their interests involve power, or people of color, or marginalized populations, that they are too ideological. I could go on, but this is getting too depressing.

Dehumanization.

Students of color on this campus experience dehumanization on a daily basis. They experience it from their peers who know they will face few if any consequences from hate speech, hate acts, and even sometimes assault and rape. They experience it from faculty who are ill prepared to deal with a diverse student body and ill trained to work with students who come from different backgrounds. They experience it from the Corporation and from administrators who are more concerned about the pristine public reputation they want Brown to have, than they are about the actual well-being of their student body. They experience it every time a staff member, faculty member, or administrator espouses a colorblind ideology, as if we are invisible, or clear, or see through. So we hear admissions numbers and Brown uses us as a marketing point, but once students get here they must seek out havens, and each other, and their communities back home just to survive their time here. Many do not make it, and I mean that quite literally. For within our stories are students of color who took their lives, dropped out, or became ill because they could not stand up to the difficulties they experienced here, be it sexual assault, physical assault,

mental abuse, emotional isolation, or all of the above.

Dehumanization.

If Brown is serious about creating a democratic, inclusive community, that stands on concepts of academic free speech, it must first become an institution that does not tolerate the dehumanization of marginalized communities. And in order to do that, the Brown Corporation, Brown administrators, faculty members, staff members, and students must become acquainted with the histories and present challenges that marginalized communities experience. You must become acquainted with structural and individual racism. You must understand how much you as an institution and as individuals still need to learn about racism, patriarchy, homophobia, heteronormativity, citizenship, and wealth privilege. You must listen, rather than react. You must have a council of people who advise you in these matters that are not only straight white men, and straight white women. You must be willing to approach people of color, their fears, and their choices to protest nonviolently as RATIONAL and LOGICAL responses to REAL threats.

Ray Kelly invited the police chief of Providence, and a number of police officers to come and hear him speak that day. Ray Kelly is not just a man with ideas. As was so succinctly said by a faculty member here at Brown, Ray Kelly is a person with institutional power who is able to enact policies that affect people's daily lives. I would go further to say that Ray Kelly is a man who has had the power to deal out chances at life and death in New York City. Ray Kelly's policies of stop and frisk have cost people lives. They have bathed entire communities, Black, brown, and Muslim, in an environment of fear. They have been a primary way to dehumanize people of color, poor people, and people of different religions in the 21st century. How can Brown call itself an inclusive democratic community and fail to be aware of this?

If Brown is committed to creating a welcoming democracy, these issues must be interrogated with more intelligence, understanding of history, and willingness to listen to marginalized voices than Brown demonstrated in October. By pursuing disciplinary actions against students who chose to voice their concerns against such a dehumanizing figure--you further dehumanize students of color by punishing them for speaking up and speaking out. Your concern for the pristine reputation of Brown University was ruined the day the first brick was laid on this campus by money gained through the slave trade. It was ruined the day that the first native peoples living on this land were displaced. It was ruined when women were barred from the campus, when the first woman was raped on this campus, when Blacks were barred from attending, the first time the word nigger or spic were written or spoken anywhere on this campus. There is no pristine reputation to save.

Recommendations to the Institution

Knowing this should give Brown courage to move forward in a new and revolutionary direction--one that will be based on HUMANIZATION and respect for all people.

This new direction requires the Corporation and the administration to ask questions instead of releasing statements. It requires the administration to listen instead of tell and threaten. It requires individuals on this campus to reckon with their own systemic privileges, prejudices, and the way they treat difference. It requires departments to take diversity more seriously than admitting one or two students of color every few years. It requires transparency and accountability for departmental hiring decisions. It requires the institution to commit to tenuring faculty of color, and to unequivocally support those faculty so that they can achieve tenure, and to put qualified people of color with demonstrated commitments to marginalized populations in high administrative positions. It requires the institution to support the few organizations and programs it has that help diverse students financially, institutionally, and publically. It requires the institution to consider the needs of the students above the economic bottom line--to fund graduate students in their 6th year, because students of color, women, international students, and students from low income backgrounds are the most VULNERABLE in this already vulnerable population. Most of all, it requires stakeholders, decision-makers, and powerful people representing Brown to be willing to hear the ugly truth, and to be willing to move forward in bravery instead of in what you believe to be self-preservation. You will find, as many of our aggrieved communities have found, that life is richer, better, and more beautiful than you can imagine when you choose truth, justice, and humanization over money, power, and force.

Some specific things that we believe Brown can do, that are specific and actionable, to take steps toward a more democratic, just, and welcoming community include:

1. On Brown's "Commitment to Diversity"

For Brown to be a competitive institution, there needs to be more significant financial, institutional, and educational support in order to effectively recruit and retain students from underrepresented minority populations. To begin this process, senior administration should be required to prioritize sustained communication between graduate students of color and the university.

We see the Fontaine Society at the University of Pennsylvania as an exemplary program that Brown should model itself after as some next steps in improving what we consider to be mediocre relationships between these students and the institution. The Fontaine Fellowship is an endowment that allows for traditionally and historically underrepresented groups in higher education to take advantage of support and resources that include conference funding as well as networking opportunities throughout their career at the university.

We applaud the efforts of Brown's Office of Institutional Diversity, especially Dean Jabbar Bennett, for programming Super Monday, which is a day of speakers and panels held in March for prospective graduate students who are from underrepresented groups. However, we see this event as well as Multicultural Dinners that occur throughout the school year only the first step towards expanding the institution's commitment to cultivating a community of underrepresented

minority scholars. A large percentage of this schools' underrepresented population includes international students, and is comprised of Master's students in Public Health, Public Policy, Public Humanities, Urban Education Policy, and the MAT program. Though MA students are here for a shorter period of time, they contribute greatly to the school *and* the city of Providence. Therefore, it is imperative to increase the budget to support these students who have to rely on some form of financial aid to continue their education. And international students of color certainly should be supported by other students who have dealt with American forms of racism.

Once on campus, graduate students from underrepresented populations can suffer from a sense of isolation. While Nabrit is dedicated to the professional and personal growth of these students, it is imperative that there is better infrastructure to allow for their voices to be heard across campus. Not only does this push toward infrastructure include financial support in the form of an operational budget for the organization, but it also requires the visibility of Deans and Senior Administrators that understand the breadth and depth of issues concerning students of color across difference, and a greater degree of transparency about where these individuals are located on campus.

2. On Campus Climate:

With regards to campus climate in relation to the Ray Kelly protest and subsequent convening of a committee to investigate the event, we believe the response to this event was mostly out of fear, not for the safety and dignity of students of color, but fear for the reputation of Brown University in front of powerful people. This response maintained white privilege, others would prefer the term white supremacy, in a moment where Brown could have taken its own "commitment to diversity" seriously. The letters that followed were filled with threats against students, shaming language, and a lack of humanization of the students who participated in the protest. If Brown is serious about addressing its problems with diversity, this type of reaction to student concerns must end. In its place, we recommend that the president begin to develop relationships with individuals, departments, and student groups that represent marginalized students, and that Brown cultivate a stronger communal commitment to historical education about marginalized people.

Rather than blaming students for bad behavior, President Paxson could have reminded students of the many forms of support Brown offers for emotional, mental and physical well-being; indicated her understanding of the serious national debate that has been brewing around Ray Kelly and stop and frisk; acknowledged the very real terror and fear that people of color have faced under unequal policing policies; directed students to support from the Third World Center and other diversity arms on the campus; called on senior administrators and faculty to have helpful conversations with students; and treated the students with dignity and respect.

As graduate students who teach and who may have encountered the undergraduates who were directly involved and continue to be affected in many ways by these events (emotionally, mentally, and physically) which ultimately manifests itself in the classroom and educational

performance, the space to discuss these issues frankly across populations on campus is sparse. Conversations are usually hushed, relegated to individual encounters with students, and dissuaded from being presented formally in courses. So there must be a commitment to creating these opportunities for discussion regularly between undergraduates, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, junior and senior faculty, administration, and staff.

The Brown Corporation and Brown administrators should cultivate an environment of deep listening, rather than reaction, as they deal with marginalized communities. This involves being attentive to the language of microaggressions that pervades campus settings. The president should be counseled by a group of people who are representative of the communities most isolated on this campus as it comes to issues of diversity, and preferably by people who do not necessarily agree with her. We believe that this would enhance her ability to respond to difficult situations, and demonstrate Brown's institutional commitment to creating a hospitable and respectful environment for all students.

The Brown Corporation and administration should make more efforts to emphasize people of color's contribution to the institution in a visible way. The way we decorate physical space demonstrates what we value, and from what we can tell, Brown values well-appointed, mostly white, mostly male people. The visibility of people of color should not just be sequestered to The Third World Center, the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice, or at Rites and Reason Theatre. As we celebrate this university's 250th anniversary, it is necessary to remember that underrepresented minorities, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, are an integral part of this institution too. Dr. Samuel M. Nabrit was the first African American to receive a doctoral degree from Brown in 1932. He was also the university's first black trustee. There is a legacy at this institution of graduate students of color achieving advanced degrees that should be acknowledged and foregrounded moving forward. Furthermore, Brown should make the strong and admirable history of protest by students at this institution a key feature of the history it tells. Brown student protests should be a point of pride, not shame for this university.

3. On Supporting Graduate Students from Marginalized Communities:

The Corporation and administration should make many more institutionally supported, financially supported, intentional efforts to support graduate students of color. Many of us have the experience of being the 1, or 2 people, representing particular communities, in our department that are expected to speak for our group. We urge the university to hold departments accountable for failing to meet diversity benchmarks starting immediately. This includes transparency around the faculty hiring process and collaboration with the Diversity Advisory Board and other necessary administrators to achieve desired goals. We urge the university to end its open hostility toward faculty of color, particularly in the tenure process. As graduate students we are very aware of every struggle that our faculty members experience, even when they will not speak with us about it, because we see the toll it takes on their health and wellness.

Brown should make more efforts to connect undergraduate, graduate, post-doctoral, faculty, and staff of color through mentorship and through targeted programming and financial support. And finally, Brown must address the dismal graduate student stipends. Many students of color and marginalized students do NOT come from families of wealth. We are NOT able to rely on our families to get us through graduate school when the school is paying us less than a livable wage for what should be considered work--not apprenticeships. These policies have a disproportionate negative effect on marginalized students, and must be addressed if Brown is serious about attracting, and retaining, its marginalized student population.

Charge to Marginalized Students and Communities at Brown

Finally, because we have many doubts that Brown as an institution will choose this path less taken, our final comments are addressed to the marginalized students of Brown University, and marginalized students everywhere who find themselves in a place that was never meant for them, with people who mean for them not to stay, under circumstances they are not intended to survive:

You are here because of generations of people who came before you, some you know, some you do not. Some who acted as communities, others who acted as individuals. These people believed that they should not be denied a prosperous country's resources and advantages on account of who they were as individuals, as communities, as peoples. But even more so, these people believed that they should not be dehumanized, should not have their dignity compromised and crushed, that they should not be in fear of their lives, their safety, their rights to speech, life, liberty and happiness, simply because of who they are—simply because their skin, their sexuality, their gender, their religion was not anglo-saxon, male, heterosexual, Christian. When people told them no, they did not accept that answer. And when people did not allow them to take part in an institution, they built their own.

You honor their memory by being here. But make no mistake. Little has changed. You are not here because Brown is deeply committed to your success. You are here because your ancestors, and you, have decided that it is just, and true, and right for you to be here. You are here because some people have made a way, a path, out of no way, no matter how much people shut doors, killed them, dehumanized them.

But do not give up the most precious right you have—the right to speak your truth—for the right to be here. This is not an even trade, and your silence will not buy you safety, it will not buy you favor, it will not buy you equality. Marginalized people come from traditions and histories stronger than any force of oppression. The proof of it is that we are still here, despite slavery, genocide, rape, deportation, terror, and violence. We will not be silent. To do so would be a great dishonor to those who have given their lives so that we can live ours in dignity, wherever we choose to be. We will continue to be accountable to the communities that gave us life, taught us our first lessons, and made us the people we are. We will never stop. We are marching forward into a new day, into a new future, into new possibilities. Brown University, we invite you to join us. But

we will not stop for you, we will stop for no one. We carry the wishes of many with us, and we will reach our goal.

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