DURHAM COUNTY

In Its Quest to Become Anti-Racist, Duke Must Reckon With a Past That Echoes Into the Present

by **Thomasi McDonald**
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“Can Duke really become anti-racist?”

The question was emblazoned on the cover of the 2020 winter edition of the Duke University alumni magazine and probed with essays, feature stories, and text excerpts from podcasts—mostly responding to the larger racial reckoning that swept America following George Floyd's death.

Letters to the editor in the issue offered mixed reviews about the magazine's coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests. But an incendiary letter submitted by Charles Philip Clutts, a 1961 Duke graduate, unleashed anger on social media. Clutts called the "constant reminders" of systemic racism "wearisome" and said Black men should marry, take care of their children, avoid drugs, stay out of jail, and realize that "acting white by studying is not a bad thing."

Duke Magazine editor Robert Bliwise, and Sterly Wilder, the associate vice president of alumni affairs, quickly issued an apology and tried to create distance between the magazine and the letter.

But some alumni felt the apology was insufficient.

"I am a young Black alum and I am utterly disgusted that these letters that spread lies, racism, and violence were published," Sabrina Dee commented on the magazine's Facebook page. "I do not accept this apology because it isn't an apology and furthermore does nothing to make right what was wrong. This is very disappointing but not surprising."

Just months before, Floyd's death prompted Duke President Vincent Price to weigh in on racial injustice, writing in the magazine's summer edition that it was time for white people to consider the impact of systemic racism and "engage deeply, and with humility, with humanity, and with honesty." But the letter's publication suggests that, for white people in power, engaging is much easier to talk about than to actually do.

A History of Racism and Injustice

It's not surprising that systemic racism is alive and well at Duke, or that the university's history of racism was anything but a prelude to the school's ongoing struggles with race relations on campus.

In "A More Complicated Love," an essay in the summer issue, Duke University archivist Valerie Gillispie explains the tension between the school's past and present.

"While we became a university only in 1924, we began our life as an educational institution in 1838," Gillispie explains. "Our records are scant about who worked at the school beyond faculty, but we have information from the 1850s that Braxton Craven, president of the institution, owned enslaved people. He also sought to purchase two children, according to an affidavit in the State Archives, but chose not to—the price was higher than he wanted to pay."

Gillispie adds that Duke apparently also "rented" enslaved labor at times.

The university's treatment of Black laborers, Gillispie writes, "remains an issue today."

Mark Anthony Neal, the James B. Duke Distinguished Professor of African and American Studies at the university, says Duke "has long had the reputation of being a 'plantation' in Durham,' [as] the city's largest employer."

"For many Black residents, Duke isn't a world-renowned university, but simply the place they go to work, and where they might in fact feel undervalued and underpaid," Neal wrote in an email to the *INDY*.

Duke's relationship with race is encapsulated by the efforts of Julian Abele, the Black architect who designed more than 30 buildings on the campus, including the Allen Building and the iconic Duke Chapel. But Abele was never allowed to set foot inside the storied sanctuary after it was completed in 1935.

Of course, the Allen building was the site of a Black student occupation in 1969, at the height of the Black Power movement. In 2016, Duke honored Abele's lasting contributions by naming the campus's busiest quadrangle the "Abele Quad."

Also in 2016, nine Duke students took to the Allen building to demand better treatment for the university's Black workers, prompting administrators to pay all university employees the city of Durham's official living wage of $12.35 an hour. A year later, Duke raised its minimum wage to $13 an hour, and then to $15 in 2019.

Collective action isn't new at Duke, but these forward strides have not always translated as effectively in other facets of life on the campus.

Theodore D. Segal—a 1977 Duke graduate and author of *Point of Reckoning: The Fight For Racial Justice at Duke University*—published last month by Duke University Press, chronicles a cache

of present-day racist incidents on campus that he calls a "troubling echo" of the 1960s. These include, in 2015, a noose found hanging near the student center, and a 2017 report from National Public Radio where African American students at Duke's divinity school described feeling like they had entered "a racial nightmare," seemingly from another era.

Black students were not the only people of color targeted.

In 2019, Megan Neely, then director of graduate studies in the Department of Biostatistics, sent an email asking international graduate students to refrain from speaking Chinese inside the department or in other professional settings because, she said, she had overheard two other professors complaining about students speaking loudly in Chinese.

Segal chronicles the reaction of the pioneering Duke pediatrician and professor Brenda Armstrong who, as a leader of the school's Afro-American Society, organized the Black student takeover of the Allen Building in 1969 to protest the racial climate on campus.

Before she died in 2018, Armstrong served as the associate dean for admissions at the Duke School of Medicine for more than 20 years, in addition to working as a senior associate dean for student diversity, recruitment, and retention.

"Everybody has a gift, and nobody's gift is better than anyone else's," Armstrong said of the racist incidents that polluted the campus before her death. "But that culture of sharing and appreciating each other's gifts has not been achieved."

Segal, an attorney and a board member at Duke's Center for Documentary Studies, writes that the school's janitors, maids, and other service workers were historically underpaid.

"The old way of running Duke was you hired ten Blacks to do the job of two and you paid them a tenth of what they should be paid," Segal writes. "Under this system, Duke's maids were paid $0.43 per hour in 1951. By the start of 1959, the hourly amount was $0.65 per hour, earning maids a paycheck of $19.50 for a standard thirty-hour workweek."

By 1965, Segal writes, when maids' wages were increased to an average of $0.85 per hour, it was still far below the federal minimum wage of $1.25, with no holiday or sick leave.

"Maids had to go from house to house and clean up for white folks to survive, or else they went on welfare," Segal says.

The Past As Prelude

Duke's historical mistreatment of its Black employees resonates with Brett Chambers, a 1979 Duke graduate whose grandmother worked as a maid at the university during the 1940s and 1950s. Chambers told the *INDY* he still feels bitter that his grandmother's work went unappreciated.

A native of Maryland, Chambers spent summers growing up in the shadow of the university's East Campus in Durham's Walltown neighborhood. In addition to his grandmother cleaning women's dormitory rooms, his cousin worked as a gardener on the campus. But when his mother, a Black woman, wanted to apply for admission, she couldn't because of the racial bar.

Duke University Archives

"My mom couldn't go to Duke, but goddammit, I said, 'I'm gonna go,'" he says. "Black people were working in the hospitals, and as cooks and nurses, doing all the work, but my grandmother's child was not even allowed the privilege to be rejected by Duke."

Does Chambers think, moving forward, that Duke can become anti-racist?

"No," he says adamantly.

Chambers, who teaches journalism at North Carolina Central University, says Duke is "fundamentally racist." But, he says, that the university acknowledging its racism is "a huge step."

Segal notes that when Duke's Board of Trustees finally voted to end the school's racially exclusive admissions in 1961, the primary reason wasn't an altruistic ideological change. It was money.

"Increasingly," he writes, "the federal government and national foundations were making clear to Duke and other southern universities that grants would stop if they refused to admit Black students."

Neal describes the role of race in the classrooms of predominantly white institutions as complex.

"From the standpoint of being a Black professor, whiteness becomes a default for expertise," Neal told the *INDY*. "So for students—even those who are Black—there is often an unconscious bias that professors of color are less prepared, less capable, and that their educational experience is diminished because of it, especially when it comes to disciplines in which faculty of color are perceived as unicorns."

Duke's racial inequity problem has not been relegated to isolated incidents.

In 2019, the university vetoed a proposed $3.3 billion Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project after university officials outlined four "unresolved challenges" related to the rail's alignment and construction, including disruption from building, noise, and liability.

Several local leaders concluded, according to reporting from the *INDY*, that Duke's upper echelon never wanted the light rail in the first place.

Mayor Steve Schewel told the *INDY* last week that the light rail project was part of the city's shared equity strategy, "because it would have helped a lot of low-income residents get access to good jobs."

Making Amends

Michael Ivory, Jr., an African American student from Miami, was admitted to Duke in 2014. In an essay published in the alumni magazine's winter issue, "Roots of the Matter," Ivory considers the university's anti-racist efforts and recalls a freshman year visit to Shooters II, a club near East Campus and popular student hangout. While waiting to get inside, Ivory writes, he struck up a conversation with a Black man, a Durham resident.

"Out of these facts came one of the most disturbing lessons I would ever learn," Ivory wrote of the conversation. The young man told him that in many Black communities in the city, Duke is called "a modern-day penitentiary."

"'We say that when you're born, Duke signs your birth certificate," Ivory remembers the man saying. "'When you work, Duke probably signs your paycheck. And when you die, Duke signs your death certificate.'"

In the months after that visit to Shooters, Ivory says he entered into the "gauntlet of academic and personal growth that defines the transition to college."

"Then, a noose was hung on campus."

Ivory concludes that Duke "has a number of ways to enact its anti-racist vision, but here is what I know: Race and racism have always been a matter of roots."

"I cannot remain satisfied with the pruning of branches," he writes.

Ivory, who is now enrolled in graduate school at N.C. State University, told the *INDY* last week that the university has made decisions and signed contracts that "literally displace whole neighborhoods."

"Duke, by all means, should look at what it looks like to relinquish land," he says.

Ivory notes that Duke should listen to organizations that "Durham decides to offer as its voice on solutions" for a range of issues.

Neal says there has been some degree of change, with more Black people in positions of leadership on campus, and that "it is clear that Duke is in a different place."

In 2020, 9 percent of undergraduate students were Black and 41 percent white, per university data; for faculty, the ratio is around 15:70 percent.

"Yet, to articulate the values of anti-racism—virtue signaling, as it were—is the easy part," Neal says. "This is going to be hard work, and 400-plus years of anti-Black racism in the United States will not be resolved because a few college administrators finally saw the light because of George Floyd."

"It is disingenuous and disrespectful," Neal adds, "to those folks who have been waging battles against anti-Black racism around the world, in this country, and even at Duke, to think this can be addressed by a few pronouncements."

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