

Hello,

On this day of Collective Engagement Against Racism, we would like to take the time to express our frustration at The Boston University Administration and at the surrounding city.

The following is an account from one of us, Zach Coto: On last Friday, Juneteenth, a day that is meant for celebrating the end of slavery in the USA, I was spending time on the walking area of the Harvard Bridge enjoying the scenic view of the sunset and the river. Apparently, I was there for too long for someone, who decided to call the police on me. From the Cambridge side of the bridge, three police cars with their sirens on pulled up along the side of the bridge where I was. I asked what was going on, and one officer said they received a call about me. I didn't want to be surrounded on a bridge talking to police officers. I backed away, saying I wasn't going to speak with them on the bridge and that I would go to the Cambridge side to talk with them. As I was walking that way, an additional police car started approaching from the Cambridge side. I wanted to avoid becoming surrounded, so I turned around and started walking back towards Boston. At this point, I can't remember the order of events in very much detail. Within a few minutes, I was surrounded by police cars (i.e. facing the bridge from the walking area, one car parked in front of me and two a distance on either side of that car). Two officers were approaching me from the right. One of the cars was shining their spotlight on me, blinding me. I asked the officers to turn it off. I told them to stay six feet away from me. I said that I didn't want to be surrounded. Before long, several cops were around me. One officer grabbed my arm tightly. I was trying to pull away and leave. I told him to let go of me, that I didn't want to be surrounded and didn't want to be there. He pulled me over to the road, I continued to try to pull away. That's when I closed my eyes because I just wanted to focus on leaving. More officers forced me face-down on the ground while they forced my hands behind my back and put me in handcuffs. Eventually, they started pushing down on my neck and back, at which point I wasn't able to move, so I stopped trying to leave and after a short period of time they walked me over to their vehicle. I refused to talk with them. I refused to give them information. When I wasn't moving fast enough for them, they would poke me to move faster. I didn't speak until I was with the EMT who I gave my information to. I had to spend four hours that night explaining to the doctors that I was just spending time doing literally nothing on the bridge. I was released to find my way home at about 1AM Saturday morning.

Let me repeat for clarity. I was literally standing by myself in a very public space doing nothing. When I told them repeatedly that I wanted to leave, I was surrounded and attacked by the police. They said repeatedly, "you're safe now". But, there was no one there to help me or to keep me safe from the police. I don't know what department they were from, how many officers there were, or how long it was, because there was no one there to record what happened while I was focused on trying to save myself

from the police. And for all of this, I now have an ambulance bill that I shouldn't have to pay.

Zach wanted to describe this event in light of several of BU's recent statements addressing racism. Last week, we were told that the University was encouraging the "21-day anti-racism challenge". We know that the "challenge" has been adopted by many organizations. However, contrast the seriousness of what Zach described above with the proposed "challenge". Racial equity should not be discussed so flippantly as if it were a fad diet. We would hope that our society plans on making a lifestyle change as opposed to going on a 21-day cleanse. Is the "challenge" meant to appeal to contemporary memes? Are the organizers aware that another "challenge" has recently come into fashion called the "George Floyd Challenge", a disgusting backlash against the BLM movement in which one individual kneels on the neck of someone pinned to the ground? The idea of a "21-day anti-racism challenge" is trivializing, and BU's messaging communicates irreverence. The "challenge" simultaneously diminishes the seriousness of the problem and, as is so often the case in the USA, still uses rhetoric that fails to emphasize that being targeted by racism is difficult. Instead, it emphasizes that to stop being racist is what is difficult with the humiliating expectation to understand and accommodate the "difficulty" that racists have when they need to change their behavior. This is not only insulting, but ineffective for fighting racism. We do not believe that systemic racism is challenged by interpersonal strategies such as the 21-day anti-racist challenge. The police knew exactly what they were doing when they attacked Zach: it was systematic, organized and planned, from the law that codifies it down to the decisions of the officers. The power of the police to enact systemic racism is, in fact, the problem we are facing. We recognize that the "challenge" includes readings about systemic and structural racism. But, the purported goal of the challenge is that self-reflection and personality change will reduce racist behavior. No amount of self-reflection by these police officers will change what they are systematically doing: they reserve the right to, and are organized to attack us. That is why they are armed; that is their occupation by definition. The President also recently announced the establishment of a Community Safety Advisory Board to make recommendations for BUPD. Without reservation, we have no confidence in this new organization to help us. "Recommendations" are not binding and the police ultimately will have the discretion to attack both us and community members. Again, that is their occupation by definition.

Furthermore, over the past several months, the BU administration has shown that we are secondary to its main priority, which is profit. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, many graduate students were told that they would lose funding due to COVID-19 in an email that was clearly a contingency plan in the event that the University decided to fire us. That was walked back by Daniel Kleinman. However, this past week, we saw parts of that contingency plan put into practice. Despite the economic impossibilities we are facing, despite being "guaranteed" continuous funding, we've just been informed last week by the administration that those of us who cannot return by September 1 will lose our stipend and healthcare support and that we have only until the 25<sup>th</sup> to ask for

exemptions from the policy. We collectively did give recommendations in person and over emails to Daniel Kleinman, Jean Morrison and Emily Barman regarding our concerns during the time when they were hosting Town Halls. None of us recommended the policies that are now in place against us and, as of now, we are powerless to do anything about it. The University's priority has not only been used against us grad students, but more broadly as well. During November 2018, when the BU facilities workers were on the verge of striking to maintain healthcare benefits in their contract, I will never forget when a BU administration official told me there were contingency plans in place if a strike for those protections were to occur. Those contingency plans would likely have been non-unionized replacement workers without health care protections, and we would have been powerless against the police enforcing those contingency plans. This strategy is once again being employed, but now against graduate students by threatening our funding during the pandemic. That our needs are only secondary to BU was shown in President Brown's initial email addressing police brutality. In that email, President Brown spends a minimum of his word count discussing the murders of Black people before quickly transitioning to the subject of having students return to campus in the Fall. His brevity is illuminating as it demonstrates that the murders of Black people are a backdrop to BU's more pressing concern: profit. A follow up, apologetic email using language of the BLM Movement does not erase an initial one and does not make us forget that, just as with racism, communications from the Administration are systematically organized and built on contingency plans.

To our community: we have been repeatedly stripped of our power and dignity at BU and in the broader city. We have no reason to continue wasting our time making recommendations when those in power have no interest implementing them. We do not have power to protect ourselves, and they have all the power to shut us down, with a police force if necessary. Can anyone seriously deny this? We should not trust the police who will always reserve the right to attack and kill us based on their laws and their rules. We know that we are not the only ones to feel this way and are aware that the systematic problems described above are far from the only ones that our community faces. We do not need interpersonal strategies to solve systematic problems. We do not need more forums to make recommendations that are going to be ignored. What we need is for our community to be organized for our own protection to implement the changes that we need, whether BU sees us as a priority or not.

-Zach Coto and Chris Thomas (PhD candidates, Bio dept.)