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Let Social Justice Roll Down Like Waves:
A Rhetorical Analysis of a Christian University's
Response to the Black Lives Matter Movement

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Introduction

From late May through July of 2020, the United States experienced a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, which was originally started in early 2012. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded out of a call for social justice and response to cases of police brutality against people of color, particularly Black Americans. The rhetorical artifact that I will be examining is Pepperdine University's response to the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the general civil unrest that occurred across the country during this time, motivated by heightening racial tensions and a nationwide demand for justice. I will be particularly examining the University's method of email communication in expressing to students the University's stance and allyship during this incredibly important time to identify several patterns in the rhetorical artifact. Pepperdine University used repetition and sequencing, prophetic voice, and synecdochical gaze to communicate to their students that their first priority in light of the events was to uphold their Christian mission and act according to the Biblical values, and that their actions moving forward as well as their value of their students is derived from those Christian values.

Descriptive Analysis of the Artifact

The first digital communication from University administration that explicitly addressed the tragic death of George Floyd, a victim of police brutality, was posted in the form of an official statement from President Jim Gash on May 30, 2020. This statement was posted 5 days after the tragic incident, which took place on May 25, 2020. One of the most notable aspects of this statement was the distinct lack of language that explicitly stated "Black Lives Matter" in any way. Gash opened up the statement expressing his own emotions about the situation, which

included “anger, sadness, and disgust”, and expressed Pepperdine’s call to be a community that spreads love, justice, and human rights (Gash, 2020) . The tone of the statement was very much prioritizing remaining in alignment with the University statement of purpose and mission, referencing Christianity and Jesus several times. Many students felt this statement was not explicit enough in condemning police brutality and the structures in place that allowed this tragedy to take place, for fear of alienating students, parents or donors who may feel differently.

The next method of communication came on June 1, two days after President Gash’s statement was released. This came in the form of an email, from Connie Horton, Vice President for Student Affairs. The most notable aspect of this email is that immediately, Horton stated explicitly that Black lives matter (Horton, 2020) . This communication felt drastically different from Gash’s initial communication because of the way that Horton’s focus was on how the student body was processing the events occurring across the country and how she could be of better support to them. She was also very intentional in clearly stating that she was intent on providing support for students of color who might be facing hardships, as well as including University resources in the email for ways that students could receive counseling or other forms of assistance. The tone of Horton’s email felt explicitly outward focused, with additional care given to students and members of the Black community, rather than Gash’s statement which felt like an attempt to “save face” for the University and reestablish a pre-existing public appearance and image.

On the same day, June 1, Dean Feltner sent another email communication to students regarding the events that attempted to patch the two communications from Gash and Horton together. In his statement, he affirmed both support for the Black community and Black students at Pepperdine,

while also reiterating Pepperdine's values and commitment to the Christian mission (Feltner, 2020). He did explicitly address Black students in his email, but was also intentional in opening and drawing back to the Christian mission, sharing a Bible verse to open the email.

Noticeable patterns in all of the communications from the University are use of non-alienating or overly strong language. All of the statements made returned to the University mission statement, which is for the spreading of love, justice and truth in alignment with Christ's message. Another pattern is that all of the University's communication affirmed agreement with Gash's initial statement, in an attempt to show solidarity and agreement between all of administration. One of the strategies used most clearly was repetition in order to reinforce the values expressed in Gash's statement. Sequencing was also used strategically for administration to speak after the initial statement and bolster it and show support, while also showing additional support for the Black community. Lastly, omission was used in the way that the perpetrator of the tragic violence himself, police officer Derek Chauvin, was never stated by name explicitly, and therefore the University never had to take a hard stance on the role he played in the situation.

Literature Review

The first piece of literature that I will be using to analyze Pepperdine's reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement is "The 'Integrative' Rhetoric of Martin Luther King by Mark Vail. In this article, Vail explores Dr. King's integrative rhetoric style through the methods of voice merging, dynamic spectacle, and prophetic voice.

Voice merging is defined as a practice where African American preachers “create their own identities not through original language but through identifying themselves with a hallowed tradition... and borrow homiletic material from many sources, including the sermons of their predecessors and peers” (Vail, 2006) . Dr. King very strongly uses Biblical rhetorical devices in order to capture the hearts of his audience. This method also utilizes pathos, because people often feel an emotional response to religious calls. Some examples of Biblical rhetoric that Dr. King utilized are “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” and “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together”, which are both references to Old Testament prophets Amos and Isaiah, respectively (Vail, 2006) . By using language that is structured in a similar way to Old Testament prophets and Biblical calls, Dr. King was creating a level of familiarity with his audience. He knew that they would respond well to that style and content of literature and rhetoric.

Dr. King’s voice merging also increased his credibility because he was able to establish himself as a person of religious authority who was knowledgeable about Biblical facts. As Vail explains, “King constructs a prophetic persona for himself through his use of personal pronouns” (Vail, 2006) . His use of language integrated himself with the prophets, which in turn indicates to the audience that he has the authority to serve as a mouthpiece or a messenger for God’s will and message. In the context of the “I Have a Dream” speech, this meant that the audience was prompted to conflate the Civil Rights Movement with God’s will, viewing Dr. King as a sort of prophet of this message.

Another one of Dr. King's rhetorical strategies was use of the prophetic voice, which promotes a "sense of mission, a desire to bring the practice of the people into accord with a sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience" (Vail, 2006). Much like the utility of voice merging, prophetic voice allows the rhetor to serve as a divine messenger who is speaking for another. "The prophet is called to reassert the terms of the covenant to a people who had fallen away, to restore a sense of duty and virtue amidst the decay of venality" (Vail, 2006). In the context of Dr. King's speech, he is fighting an uphill battle to convey the message to a people who do not all agree with him. He concisely and wisely uses rhetorical strategy to use religion as a tool in order to declare authority and demand audience attention. The use of this prophetic voice added value to the already valuable content of his message, his speech, and his overall mission. Once again, this was a use of pathos in that he was speaking to a people who value and revere religious authority and in theory, were seeking to further God's mission for the good of His people. This method also allowed Dr. King greater ethos, as he was communicating in a way that indicated his authority and credibility to speak on the matter.

The last rhetorical strategy of Dr. King's that Vail outlines in his article is dynamic spectacle. "Thomas B. Farrell describes 'spectacle' contemporarily as a socially constructed event, with its origins grounded in the Aristotelian definition of the term as a 'weak hybrid form of drama, a theatrical concoction that relied upon external factors (shock, sensation, and the passionate release) as a substitute for intrinsic aesthetic integrity'; it includes (but is not limited to) events 'such as the televised rituals of conflict and social control'" (Vail, 2006). In other words,

dynamic spectacle is the social construction of an event that allows for a rhetorical response that fulfills a community's need in regard to the event. Dynamic spectacle allows for the rhetors to present their ideologies in their rhetorical responses and construct a response that they find most fitting in regard to how they believe the situation should be handled. For example, "The March on Washington, as a dynamic spectacle, was most certainly a 'coalescing event' that 'for a brief moment' brought together rhetors holding different ideological interpretations of the civil rights movement." Although Dr. King's event was socially constructed due to much larger outside and systemic factors, it was still a socially constructed situation that required a rhetorical response. Dr. King, through his speech using the rhetorical strategies explained above, chose to respond in a way that promoted what he felt was the best ideology was to deal with the situation.

The next piece of literature that I will be reviewing is "Legitimizing the First Black Presidency: Cinematic History and Rhetorical Vision in Barack Obama's 2008 Victory Speech" by Daniel J. DeVinney. In this article, DeVinney examines the modern visual theories of phantasmatic montage, synecdochical gaze, and frames of energeia and energeia to analyze the ways that Barack Obama's 2008 election night address legitimized the first Black presidency.

The first modern visual theory that Obama used in his speech was phantasmatic montage. Phantasia is a multisensory tool most associated with vision and the formation of mental images, and is foundational to visual rhetoric. It is also known as imagination (DeVinney, 2021).

According to DeVinney, "Obama used phantasia to produce mental images of important historical scenes and combined them into a larger montage that authorized his presidency"

(DeVinney, 2021) . The language Obama used was very vivid, descriptive, and referenced historical and social scenes that his audience would be able to visualize with ease. He painted scenes for his audience that encapsulated history that highlighted American perseverance. He was communicating to his audience that like many Americans in history, under his presidency, Americans would be able to overcome whichever hardships they faced. This relied primarily on pathos for the audience to be drawn to the emotional ties that an individual would have to nationalism and the American experience.

Another method that DeVinney identifies in Obama's speech is synecdochical gaze. This is a narrative strategy in which the narrator constructs a perspective for their audience, which influences how the audience understands the events and actions within that story (DeVinney, 2021) . "Seeing narratives through particular lenses are common practices in contemporary visual culture, even if these ways of looking are not made explicit. In speech, a synecdochical gaze tells a story from the perspective of a stand in for the audience. The audience is meant to adopt their gaze and see that history through those eyes. This perspective, like enthymematic reasoning, is unspoken, but influential on an audience's understanding" (DeVinney, 2021) . By using synecdochical gaze, the rhetor is placing themselves into a place of authority to determine the lens through which the audience should evaluate or experience the rhetorical situation. This is what Obama did with his use of the pronoun "we" in order to include himself as part of the same human experience as his audience. "Synecdochical witnessing became explicit when Obama moved from describing what Ann Nixon Cooper saw to 'America, we have come so far. *We* have seen so much.' Obama then asked his audience to take that gaze and imagine the next century: 'But there is so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves: If our children should live to

see the next century, if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?” (DeVinney, 2021)

The last rhetorical strategy that DeVinney considered in Obama’s address was the way he framed *enargeia* and *energeia*. According to DeVinney, “the terms *enargeia* and *energeia* are an important part of rhetorical vision and are intimately linked with the concept of *phantasia*. *Enargeia* with an alpha or ‘a’ is commonly translated as ‘vivid description,’ while *energeia* with an epsilon or ‘e’ has to do with ‘motion or activity’” (DeVinney, 2021) . Both concepts exist to assist the audience in producing mental images. In Obama’s address, he used *enargeia* and *energeia* to create spots of bright and energetic moments for the audience to be able to picture themselves in. “Obama’s cinematic history was not merely a montage of static images but instead a lively and active display” (DeVinney, 2021) . This is another example of how Obama used *pathos* in his speech by capturing the audience’s attention and causing them to feel personal investment in his election victory and time in office.

Rhetorical Approach - Methodology

There were several rhetorical methods and strategies that I evaluated in Pepperdine’s written statements and responses regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. Pepperdine administration used repetition, sequencing, prophetic voice, and synecdochical gaze in their rhetorical response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Repetition and sequencing was used in the way that the emails consistently repeated Pepperdine's mission and stance on the situation regarding Mr. George Floyd's death and the response of the Black community. In his first statement, which was released on May 30, 2020, President Gash was quick to state "at the very heart of Pepperdine is love for all people." (Gash, 2020) This is the first value that he presents as part of Pepperdine's method to approaching the situation and the stance that Pepperdine as an institution would take towards the situation. At the end of his statement, Gash repeats this value of love again as he quotes Micah 6:8, which reads "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Gash, 2020) . In the next email communication sent by Dean Feltner on June 1, he repeats these values and reiterates the entire administration's support for President Gash's message, once again using repetition to reinforce that Pepperdine shares a united front and that at the heart of what is most important to Pepperdine is its core values. "Each of us is a child of God, made in his image, and we strongly affirm the value of all people" (Feltner, 2020) . The repeated inclusion of Christian values is addressed at the end of Dean Feltner's email as he states, "As President Gash remarked, we know that God desires 'peace and justice in our world' and that our Pepperdine community cannot rest 'until there is healing and deep appreciation for the value of all God's beloved.' ...May God embolden us to speak truth with love, and may he sustain us as we do the work of justice both at home and in the world" (Feltner, 2020) . This use of repetition is to ensure that the student body is clear that Pepperdine's Christian mission is the driving force behind all of the stances that they take.

Pepperdine's very strong affinity for Christian rhetoric and Biblical references were a type of prophetic voice that the administration utilized in order to decide how they would be

approaching the situation. In every communication from a member of Pepperdine administration, there was a Biblical reference of some sort. In President Gash's statement, he very explicitly stated Pepperdine as a Christian university multiple times, even quoting a Bible verse at the end of his statement. "Our community includes thousands of faculty, staff, students, and alumni from every walk of life and with differing backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences—each one of them beloved. We believe God designed creation that way—with beautiful diversity. God created every person with equal value and dignity, and desires peace and justice in our world. As a Christian university, we are committed to being a light for justice, peace, and love, in our community, nation, and world" (Gash, 2020). As Vail stated in his article, this prophetic voice capitalizes on the use of "we" and Gash is intending to speak for the entire University in these statements that he is making (Vail, 2006). He is working as a mouthpiece for God's mission and what would be considered a proper Christian response to the situation at hand. By doing this, he is attempting to solidify reassurance and communal agreement in the Pepperdine community, as well as using Biblical references and religious calls of authority to appeal to the audience's pathos.

Furthermore, Dean Feltner uses prophetic in his email statement, issued June 1, 2020 to all students. He opened up the email with a tone often used by preachers at the beginning of a sermon. "Waves. I have come to relish the allegory provided by waves in my thirty plus years at Pepperdine. Created by our Lord in his design of the universe, waves are an enduring reminder of God's steadfastness and presence. Their beauty lifts my spirit and their sound calms my soul" (Feltner, 2020). This style of speech very clearly mirrors the way that a preacher might begin a sermon, which Feltner is using to intend to communicate to the audience that he is of religious

and spiritual authority, and therefore is working as a mouthpiece for both God and the University. This is a similar method that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used in his “I have a dream” speech, as described by Vail.

Another rhetorical device that Pepperdine’s official statements used was synecdochical gaze. By explicitly stating that Pepperdine is a community with shared feelings towards the tragedy of George Floyd and the events that followed, Pepperdine administration was establishing a lens through which they wanted the entire community to view the situation, as well as their response to it. In Gash’s original statement, he states “We denounce the oppression of marginalized people and racism in all its forms. We stand for the tireless pursuit of justice for all, and the fight for radical and overdue change. We stand committed to upholding human rights for all people, and we affirm the values of racial equity, inclusion, and non-violence” (Gash, 2020). The repetitive use of “we” indicates that it is a shared experience that all of Pepperdine’s community agrees with. In his article, DeVinney describes how the rhetor creates a lens through which the audience views the rhetorical situation, and that is what the Pepperdine administration was effectively doing in using “we” language and integrating the Christian mission into every statement (DeVinney, 2021).

In Dr. Horton’s follow-up response to Jim Gash’s initial statement, which received flack for not being strong enough, she said, “Let there be no doubt that we believe black lives matter” (Horton, 2020). In her response, Dr. Horton was working to shift the synecdochical gaze from what people initially felt was a weak response, to reassuring students where the administration stood on the issue of Black Lives Matter specifically. Dr. Horton was refocusing and re-ensuring

to students that the administration was in support of Black Lives Matter. It was so crucial that she explicitly state this in her follow-up email to Gash's statement because at this point, most of the student body widely felt that the administration and Gash in particular were not in support of the BLM movement, therefore she had to shift the public perception of the administration's stance on the issue.

Analysis

In analysis, I believe rhetorically, Pepperdine had a semi-successful response to the Black Lives Matter movement. The rhetorical devices that were used were specifically chosen to be appropriate for this particular rhetorical situation, and allowed for Pepperdine to continue to be perceived in the way that it has been historically. Although there were students who did not feel that Pepperdine took a strong enough stance on such an important and crucial issue, the rhetorical strategies that Pepperdine used aligned with its mission and the tone that it, as an institution, chooses to emote. Pepperdine is known for its conservative politics and policies that align with the Christian mission, as well as with the politics of its donors.

Many students felt that Pepperdine's response to such a heavy and important situation were weak, and lacked recognition of the weight of these issues in the real world. Students felt that Pepperdine was communicating that the Christian values and mission were more important than the lives and wellbeing of individual Black students in the Pepperdine community. This is why after Gash's initial statement, Dr. Connie Horton released a statement with more explicit support of the Black community at Pepperdine. In the last statement received from administration, "A

Message from President Gash: Listening and Taking Action” (2020), he seemed to be taking action and repairing the lack of support shown in his initial response given a few days earlier.

The other priority of the Pepperdine administration was to appear as a united front who stood on the same page regarding this very important issue. This is why in their communications, administrators frequently referenced each others’ statements and showed explicit support for the other. The main priority of Pepperdine’s responses were to be united, and to back the Christian mission that Pepperdine stands for.

It is very clear that Pepperdine’s route and method of choice in addressing the Black Lives Matter movement and tragedy of the death of George Floyd was to function using religious authority and appeal. This was the method that most closely aligned with its Christian values and would please the donors and students that attend Pepperdine because of its religious foundation. Even in the statements in which Pepperdine showed support for the Black community and its Black students, it is clear that the priority of the University was with upholding Christian values first and foremost. Through the rhetorical methods I described above, Pepperdine was cementing its place as a Christian University before any other priorities or values were explicitly stated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pepperdine University’s response to the Black Lives Matter movement aligned very strongly with the image the University portrays and the values it claims to uphold. Each of Pepperdine’s responses, communicated to students after the tragic death of George Floyd took place, aligned with the Christian mission that Pepperdine prides itself upon upholding. Through

the rhetorical methods of repetition and sequencing, prophetic voice, synecdochical gaze, Pepperdine successfully communicated these values to its students.

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