Austin McCoy
Law School Pop Up Event

Do Not Distribute

Thanks everyone for coming today. Thanks to Suellyn for inviting me to speak. I look forward to our conversation. I will try to keep my remarks brief.

In my remarks, I am going to focus mostly on the protest responses at UM to the appearance of white supremacist, nationalist, xeonophobic and anti-immigrant, misogynist, and islamophobic propaganda that has appeared on campus over the past year. While I would not lump Charles Murray into the same category as the white supremacists—if we are to talk the white supremacists political goals seriously—I do see these posters and these talks as part of the same STRATEGIC FIELD of political work on the right. All of these folks may not express the exact same politics, but they probably understand how all of these events and organizations work in concert (even if they aren't conspiring with each other). The talks and the appearance of white supremacist posters on campuses across the country are more about political strategy rather than simple appeals to free speech. (This should be an obvious point by now.) Some on the right want to rekindle a culture war and use it to continue attacking the intellectual and political cultures of colleges and universities. This war, to me, is about the effort to destroy tenure and decimate the humanities.

Yet, for self-avowed white nationalists and supremacists like Richard Spencer and the locals who have sought to hang posters on campus, their actions are about recruitment. They try to appeal to mostly straight white guys who are alienated by the appearance of racial progress, the appearance of the progress of women, especially in what's considered as male domains in the workplace and the public sphere like tech and gaming. They are also trying to appeal to white guys who are alienated by the political and economic forces, like globalization and immigration, that white supremacists think are destroying "white culture."

The major point I want to make, as an activist, is that we have to try to see our responses within a strategic field like folks on the right. So, yes, I do believe thinking about the law—what constitutes free and hate speech—is important. I also believe that much of the posters we've seen on campus has not just advocated notions of white pride and black inferiority, they have advocated harm—for example, the posters instructing folks to call ICE on "undocumented people" (how are we supposed to know)—in the wake of Trump's election last November. The recent racist graffiti scrawled on name tags in dorms and in town warrants the administration (in the campus case) and the authorities to hold the perpetrators accountable. But, with all of that said, this is about politics for white supremacists, nationalists, and even some of the conservatives who see themselves as separated from the Spencers and Steve Bannons, and we should act accordingly.

This is why black women and POC students came together last year to form Students 4 Justice. They were the first to respond to the white supremacist posters that appeared last October. They found President Schlissel's response too slow and inadequate. So, S4J relied upon mass action—taking over the fishbowl, disrupting a poorly-framed debate about black lives matter, and leading a walkout. These mass actions gave them more power to make demands on President Schlissel—even on social media through the hashtag: Schlisselwya.

While S4J was organizing, some of us were thinking about how to involve more people into the process. Welp, as I do, I went to facebook and social media to solicit some ideas. Then in a conversation between myself, Matthew Countryman, and Martha Jones, we all converged around the question—what are the white folks to do? I put out a call to meet to respond and the Collective Against White Supremacy was born. This was conceived of as a mostly-white ally counterpart to the POC S4J. And there's precedent for this in anti-racist student politics at UM—

the Students for a Democratic Society supported the first Black Action Movement strike in 1970; the United Coalition Against Racism worked with the Black Action Movement III during the 1980s; and another group I was part of, the United Coalition for Racial Justice worked in a support capacity with #BBUM. The folks in CAWS focused on patrolling the various kiosks, tearing down any white supremacist posters that appeared, and also hanging posters in support throughout campus. For CAWS it was about helping S4J to signal that UM, at least among students, would be a space where white supremacy was not welcome.

My thinking about our tactics have evolved since last year where we made some critical mistakes, some mistakes that even help cause some of us harm. Myself and others were trolled and attacked on social media when we responded to these events by raising awareness on social media. I don't think I've ever been called nigger that much in my life, nor had I ever received any death wishes until then. So, after watching some of the anonymous perpetrators on Twitter, I've concluded that we need to respond to white supremacy by blacking it out. That means silently taking down their posters. We as individual students can do it, not administrators for fears around free speech. This also means no reposting of their fliers, even if one is criticizing. What they do is commandeer peoples' post, even if they're being criticize, and use this as evidence among their followers that they're being persecuted, or that they have more power than they actually do. Much of these events—posters, marches, speeches—is about projection than an accurate reflection of their power.

We also do patrols, but I encourage folks to be safe. It's okay to wait until folks hang up stuff before taking it down.

So, how do my thoughts about blacking out white supremacists relate to tomorrow's talk? Good question. Obviously, I will not talk about any plans that have been made. I will also talk hypothetically. The first thing to remember, and I'm repeating myself, is that these types of events most likely fit into a broader political strategy for which ever group who is organizing. This means one must speculate about their motivations and goals. We just cannot focus on the obvious—that one's speech is immoral and dangerous. Nor do I think making moral claims about whether or not someone deserves a platform is a great argument. Because, yes, I agree that someone who has produced racist work, which has been used by white supremacists, does not deserve the same type of respect that other rigorous intellectuals receive. But, I'm not quite sure if the moral aspect of speech is important anymore because this isn't about the free exchange of ideas; this is about the right trying to set traps to fulfill their victimhood narrative and to try to make students and scholars look anti-intellectual (which is ironic).

Does this mean only engage these types of speakers verbally in Q&A? Not necessarily. I do believe in making it a little difficult to get their message out. According to UM's Standard Practice Guide Policies around the Freedom of Speech and Artistic Expression: one does have a right to heckle and protest up until a point. It even states that "protesters have rights, just as do speakers and artists." So, I'm all for making it difficult.

But, I'm also for being super creative and for being strategic when it comes to the range of speakers. Just because I see these posters, Murray, Bannon, Milo, Ann Coulter, Spencer, and others within a same strategic field, does not mean I think they are all the same politically and intellectually and they pose the same threat. If I had my way, I wouldn't respond to Murray in the same way I would to a Richard Spencer or a Milo. Murray looks more like a sympathetic figure if protests go awry. Richard Spencer's political incoherence, gaffes, and getting punched

in the face (seriously, though I'm not advocating for it), makes him look less serious. Milo is scary because, for him, it's not about looking sympathetic, it's about building his villainous persona. If Milo shows up and is able to speak, folks need to find a way to black him out—make it seem as if he's not here. That's tough. So, at the very least, folks would have to find ways to redirect any media attention away from him.

Tomorrow will surely be interesting. Some of us have been waiting for someone like Charles Murray to come talk—and it's a tactical and political test. I hope I am overreacting, but this could be the test case that determines whether or not more speakers within this particular strategic field attends. But, like I said, we just cannot just respond to events like this with only moral righteous indignation (and I emphasize righteous here, because we are). This is about white supremacist and the right organizing to disrupt one form of power (that of faculty and students), while building another form of power (that of disaffected conservatives, white men, generally, and those outside of the university). And one way to build such popular power is to accumulate moral authority, which is right out of the civil rights movement's playbook. So being right, alone, doesn't help. We have to find creative ways to fuse the intellect, legal, political, and social together into a winning strategy that not only signals to white nationalists and white supremacists that they're not welcome, but one that expands anti-racist movements on campus. Thank you.