

The Department of History
June 5, 2020

Statement on Racial Violence, History, and the Potential of the Future

In the days after Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, the United States saw waves of pain and protest over the death of yet another African American at the hands of a white police officer. Unfortunately, we have seen incidents like this unfold before. Our nation's history is haunted by this familiar pattern: white violence against people of color, the harassment of communities of color by police officers and other law enforcement agents (especially the Border Patrol), mobilization against that violence, and an extreme and vitriolic reaction to those demands for justice, equity, and inclusion. In some ways the murder of Floyd mirrored its antecedents, but in other ways it was singular. This death happened days after the nation learned that Auhmad Aubrey, a young African American man jogging in a white neighborhood, had been gunned down by white men; and a white woman played on racist tropes by calling 911 to "save" her from Christian Cooper, a Black man watching birds in Central Park who had simply ask her to leash her dog. It happened less than a year after a white nationalist killed 23 people and injured dozens of other shoppers in an El Paso Walmart, seeking to terrorize the city's predominantly ethnic Mexican community. Moreover, Floyd's death happened in the midst of a global pandemic that is disproportionately killing people of color, under an administration that has stoked the flames of racial animosity and has caged men, women, and children who were deemed security threats, when white supremacist organizations are growing in power, and as our nation's leaders have turned their backs to the world.

Indeed, the George Floyd killing illuminates an indisputable fact: the United States has yet to truly confront its unbroken legacy of racism, xenophobia, and nativism that is ultimately rooted in white supremacy and informs our present moment.

As scholars, teachers, and students of history, we know that injustice has been met with *demands for justice*. We know that inequality has been met with *demands of equality*. We try to teach our students about the pain and suffering of marginalized communities while we simultaneously foreground movements for freedom, democracy, anti-racism, and representation. We can analyze the roots of the violence and racism that caused the death of George Floyd, and we can trace the activism of groups such as Black Lives Matter as they cultivate a new society that values the humanity of all people of color. And yet, that knowledge is sometimes overshadowed by public debates that largely unfold online, where discussion can be superficial; or via the dominant news networks, where pundits offer soundbites rather than thoughtful historical analysis.

As scholars, educators, and students of history, we have a role to play in the events unfolding today. We can write statements of solidarity and we can express our alliance with the victims of racial violence, but we can do better. The discipline of history has for too long crafted narratives that uphold white supremacy, nationalism, and imperialism. We must work to dismantle those myopic visions of the past. We can start by acknowledging the United States' imperial roots that led to violence against Native/ Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and Mexicans. We can obviously start with the courses we teach. Our classes can trace the origins of the present pain caused by imperialism, inequality, violence, and injustice; and we can foreground struggles for justice and equity. We can reframe historical narratives to excavate white supremacy as well as multi-dimensional alliances between and across communities of color, as well as (im)migrant communities, and the LGTBQ+ community. We can model anti-racist behavior every day and advocate for inclusion and diversity in our faculty and student body. We can recognize how our scholarship and pedagogy sometimes sustains white supremacy. We can create safe spaces in our classes and across campus, where students will feel comfortable to speak freely not only about histories of trauma, but of the ways in which that past informs the present. We can contest white privilege and the real and discursive ways in which it manifests itself in classroom discussion on

campus. We can provide institutional, financial, and moral support for student groups representing marginalized and victimized communities. We can promote the elevation of African American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, Women's and Gender Studies Programs to department status – with commensurate faculty and budgets – to provide a more robust analysis of the experiences of all people. We can establish community partnerships via our Public History program that foreground historical struggles for equality, we can offer internships oriented towards social justice, and we can recruit and retain all students of color to create a campus that accurately represents the diversity of the Paso del Norte borderlands.

We stand with the family of George Floyd, the African American Studies Program, the Black Student Union, and the UTEP students who have articulated a poignant sense of outrage at the recent killings. But we can do more than stand with them: we can walk with them to cooperatively build a future that brings change and transformation for all people of color, the marginalized, the under-represented, and the oppressed. We can build UTEP into an institution that facilitates a positive and productive future for everyone, that protects people from all walks of life, all nationalities, and identities. To do anything less would be to turn a blind eye to injustices of the past, to close our hearts to the inequities of the present, and to ignore the potential of a more just and egalitarian future.