

ON BLACK LIFE, POLICE VIOLENCE, & WHITE SUPREMACY

UNLV African American and African Diaspora Studies Program

The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, David McAtee, and the less publicized transman Tony McDade at the hands of the state represents a long-standing, brutally racist tradition that is as American as the U.S. anthem itself. The “Star-Spangled Banner,” for instance, informed us that Black subordination was embedded in the nation’s founding, “No refuge could save the hireling and slave/From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.” Indeed, two centuries after the anthem was penned, post Emancipation, post Reconstruction, post Jim Crow, post the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, the Civil Rights era, the Black Power Movement, and various Black feminist and Black queer movements, a nation that celebrates whiteness is still unable to imagine Black life and livability. Consequently, Black people are still facing “the gloom of the grave.” In this way, the justified anger and hurt displayed in the current protests are as much about George Floyd as they are about the countless names of Black people that are too numerous to fit in this short statement. More still, the protests are about the structural ways in which anti-Black racism and white supremacy persistently work to make Black life unlivable.

As the faculty of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas’ African American & African Diaspora Studies program, housed in the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies, we unequivocally condemn anti-Black racism, white supremacy, and the legal and extra-legal murder of Black people. It is easy to assume that racist violence only occurs elsewhere, or is a relic of a distant past, but we must not forget that the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) has a robust (and recent) history of misconduct and officer-involved shootings. From the murders of Trevon Cole to Stanley Gibson, LVMPD is very much steeped in a history of racial and racist violence. Moreover, our university, one whose mascot is a “Rebel” that is tied to the Confederate States of America, is not without its fault. Since 2016 this campus has annually experienced acts of anti-Black sentiments, which, we should note, are always “discussed” but left unchecked. As one of the most diverse universities in the nation, we have a responsibility to protect our students, staff, and faculty and we will not be complicit in supporting a system that continues to put us at risk. If the University is to live up to its mantra, “Different, Daring, and Diverse,” it must demonstrate an active commitment to addressing and preventing racist activities on campus and speak against police harassment of marginalized and underrepresented communities in the broader Las Vegas valley.

The LVMPD’s statement on the murder of George Floyd was disappointingly tepid. Floyd’s death was more than “deeply disturbing,” as Sheriff Lombardo stated, it was another example in the long history of state violence against people of African descent, and anything outside overt condemnation is unsatisfactory and disheartening. We call upon the university to follow suit with the University of Minnesota and demand that UNLV end all contracts with LVMPD immediately for all events, concerts, ceremonies, and other large gatherings. Further, we are asking that a portion of the resources spent on the LVMPD be redirected to the AAS program so that we are able to work with UNLV and surrounding communities towards a truly “daring, diverse, and different” university.

This is a bold call indeed, but it emerges through our deep concern for the students, staff, faculty, and community members who fear for their safety. Our call implores campus leadership to diverge from settler colonial logics that imagines policing as the sole legitimate mode of safety. We understand too well that under this Eurocentric framework, state-sanctioned and white vigilante violence will not be categorically condemned, cannot be understood as terrorism, or even unlawful, as it is a necessary condition of nation-making. How else are we to understand the patience of police officers with the heavily armed white groups in Michigan who were “protesting” the quarantine orders in the middle of a pandemic just a few weeks prior, patience that many officers lost the moment Black people demanded the right to live and the right to matter?

The issue of protecting Black life is interconnected to broader struggles against the country’s white supremacist foundations. Lest we forget that these lands in the Southwest, upon which UNLV is built, were taken from the indigenous Paiutes. Lest we forget the US regime still promotes the seizure of indigenous lands ranging from Mauna Kea (Hawaii) to the recent invasion of Standing Rock in North Dakota. The Trump administration has normalized anti-Asian racism as highlighted by COVID-19, Latinx folks (including small children) being held in cages at the border, the framing of Middle Eastern people as terrorists to justify unfettered militarism, and so much more.

These current protests are highlighting, yet again, the long continuation of police violence and how their actions, rooted in settler colonialism, reflect larger systemic issues that infect every area of the United States, including southern Nevada. Finally, that so many are more concerned with the loss of property than the loss of Black life illustrates the dire need for the kinds of resources for programming, workshops, and events that focus on healing the community that has suffered for hundreds of years under an oppressive, suppressive and violent system of white supremacy. We will no longer be silent.

The faculty of African American & African Diaspora Studies at UNLV