

Statement on Our Dual Pandemics

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The Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, the Department of Studies in Race, Colonialism, and Diaspora, and the African American Trail Project remain committed to the pursuit of racial justice and equality at this moment of global pandemic. Below are reflections from Kendra Field and Kerri Greenidge, co-directors of the African American Trail Project and CSRD / RCD faculty members at Tufts. Following these reflections is a list of resources, readings, and opportunities to engage with our ongoing collective struggle.

Kendra Field, Ph.D.

I have hesitated to add more words to this historic moment. We have so many words at our disposal. In recent days, formal statements about racial injustice from Amazon and Citibank corporation have circulated alongside statements from grassroots organizations, reminding us to keep our eyes on the prize, and to always remember that actions speak far louder than words.

Over the past several weeks, we have all witnessed the staggering intersection of dual pandemics – that of Covid-19 (including its disparate impacts on communities of color) and that of American structural racism – that can easily leave us speechless. And yet there are a few words I'd like to offer up as a historian. My work as a historian has focused on the history of race, slavery, and social movements in the United States, and on African American family history and memory; my grandmother's grandparents were born enslaved in the U.S. South, and my first book traced their efforts to escape the racial violence of their own time for Indian Country; my own ancestry in the United States is both African American and Creek Indian.

Now, as a scholar of African American, Native American, and U.S. history, I can attest that the nature of the crisis we are witnessing at the intersection of Covid-19 and American structural racism, while overwhelming, is not entirely new. Approaches to disease, illness, and – in today's language – public health have been deeply rooted in the history of racism, xenophobia, removal, and segregation since the earliest days of European colonization of North America and the Atlantic slave trade. And this relationship has been sustained and renewed at key moments throughout American history - from Indian Removal to the Civil War and Jim Crow eras, and from the Chinese Exclusion Act to 20th century immigration and urban policymaking.

That said, like so many of you who care about community and who have dedicated portions of your lives to working with others to improve our collective conditions, as we entered into quarantine back in March, I felt the newness of our situation. I was acutely aware that in any other moment of such egregious federal neglect and wrongdoing, we would have been organizing and building community together, in person. I was initially stunned that it seemed our most basic organizing tools had been suspended by our public health conditions – our simple ability to be together, to organize, and to strengthen community in the face of crisis. But this, too, I soon recalled, was not entirely new. For instance, one in three enslaved women,

men, and children were separated from a parent or sibling or spouse by the slave trade in the 19th century. Families and communities were torn apart seasonally, like clockwork, but also randomly, torture without warning. Yet our ancestors made community and built resistance with the people that remained, with the new people that arrived, and with the spirits of the beloveds they would never again meet on this earth. No, we have never organized under optimal conditions. We have always made freedom with the people and the tools available to us.

Until this moment, I could not have imagined tens of thousands of masked protesters in the street amidst a global pandemic. Yet I am incredibly grateful to bear witness to the tremendous national and international outrage over the tragic murder of George Floyd and countless others. Because what *does* appear to be new in all of this – and on this point my fellow historians of social movements reflect a growing chorus of agreement – is in fact the scale and scope of the public response to our dual pandemics. In the course of American history, this kind of large-scale, multi-week protest extending from every major city to hundreds of small towns and suburbs, is not something we have not seen before. And it expands across the globe.

In the initial days, there was lots of public discussion about how these protests might produce a new wave of the pandemic; this discussion was framed as though the pandemic and protests were separate issues at odds with one another. In response to media inquiries, a group of infectious disease experts – epidemiologists, doctors, social workers, medical students, and others at the University of Washington – drafted a collective letter, highlighting the connection between the two, arguing that the protests must be supported, because it is systemic racism that fosters both the disproportionate burden of Covid-19 on black communities *and* perpetuates police violence. In their words, such protests address, “the paramount public health problem of pervasive racism.”

It is critical that we work hard against the compartmentalization of our work, our issues, our tools, our challenges, and indeed our communities. It is critical that we get better, quicker, and more strategic about seeing and understanding these connections. It is critical that we teach others to see and understand them, including our children. I have a nine year-old son and am now nearly nine months pregnant. I’ve received dozens of emails and phone calls over the last weeks from friends and colleagues, reaching out not only about being “pregnant in a pandemic” but about what it means to bring a black boy into such a world at such a time, and about what it means to truly educate all of our children. Finally, it is critical that we communicate not for the sake of hearing ourselves speak, or performing our knowledge, but for the simple sake of sharing, with humility, what we think we know, and expanding the circle that will act when the time comes.

For, it seems, the time may have come. In the prescient words of James Baldwin, “No one can possibly know what is about to happen: it is happening, each time, for the first time, for the only time.”

Kerri Greenidge, Ph.D.

In 1953, James Baldwin concluded his famous essay “A Stranger in the Village: “people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” Baldwin spoke, of course, about the ways in which the history of global white supremacy informed all aspects of contemporary life, both in the United States, from which

he fled, and Switzerland, where he wrote many of the essays that eventually became *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). Today, as we enter the third week of worldwide protests against the murder of George Floyd, it behooves us to remember the historical context with which we are all engaged. In June, 2020, it is almost exactly four years since a wikileaks release of Hilary Clinton's emails was somehow seen as equal in importance to Donald Trump's taped confession of sexual assault. At the same time, fall of 2016, U.S. intelligence reports that the Russian government hacked American computers to interfere in the country's election process received less coverage than accusations of "lock her up" and "nasty woman." Also in June 2020, it is nearly 5 years since activist Sandra Bland was found hanging under suspicious circumstances in a Waller County, Texas Jail; it is almost six years since Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann shot twelve year old Tamir Rice in a park; and it is a little over 8 years since George Zimmerman stalked and shot 17 year old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida.

But given Baldwin's prescient statement – that "people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" – we must also acknowledge and remember that June 2020 also marks 18 years since the L.A. Riots, which means that it has been 19 years since Rodney King was beaten by Los Angeles Cops, 35 years since white police dropped bombs on MOVE members in Philadelphia, over 50 years since Chicago police shot 21 year old activist Fred Hampton as he lay sleeping in his apartment, 56 years since Philadelphia, Mississippi police, in cooperation with the local KKK, abducted and murdered three civil rights workers; and 99 years since white police officers, the National Guard, and local sheriffs launched the country's bloodiest anti-black attack against prosperous African American citizens in the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, OK.

I offer this history as context, not as racial pornography or salacious anecdote, because at this moment, as we respond to world wide protest against police brutality, white supremacy, and anti-black racism, we have to recognize that we proclaim black lives matter and demand police abolition because what happened to Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others is the culmination of centuries of anti-blackness that is as much a part of the American fabric as the most powerful myths about our own exceptionalism.

As we recall this history, however, we must also remember that at each of these moments – from the arrival of Africans in 1619 Jamestown, through the current backlash against the first African American president – each of these moments has inspired black resistance whose radical legacy reverberates in the thousands who march today from Bristol to Philadelphia, Chicago to Brussels. My own work as a historian of black radicalism, race, and social movements has taught me that for every Tulsa Race Massacre there is an African Blood Brotherhood; for every Emmett Till there is a Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee; for every Trayvon Martin there is a Black Lives Matter. This is as much a part of who we are as the violent repression and reactionary white backlash that constantly force us to reckon with the unrealized promise of the American experiment. And, as many historians have been saying over the past few weeks, this current moment is the sum of our sordid racial history, but it is also a new moment.

At no other time have spontaneous, yet well-coordinated and peaceful mass protests grown and continued over nearly two weeks on a global scale, in the face of police violence and Federal threat. At no other time have thousands of people decorated the wall outside of the White House with so many banners,

tributes, and testimonies to the lives of black people murdered by the police. And at no other time have we seen millions of people willing to brave the streets during a pandemic that disproportionately affects themselves and their communities to demand an immediate end to police brutality and the systemic racism that enables it. And so while I, like most of us here today, am tired; while I am overwhelmed, and brooding over the future for my black nieces and nephews, and the little people who bring such joy to my life, I am also aware that this time has the potential to be radically different if we engage with, and learn from, the protest tradition in which we stand. Yes, as James Baldwin stated, people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them,” but this means the tragedy as well as the triumph, the bloodshed as well as the beauty, the oppression as well as our long tradition of defiance as we make our world anew.

Readings and Resources

Selected Readings

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010)

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963)

Ashley Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Defined an Era* (2019)

Kendra Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (2018)

Kerri Greenidge, *Black Radical: The Life and Times of William Monroe Trotter* (2019)

Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (2016)

Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (2019)

Walter Johnson, *Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (2020)

Peniel Joseph, *Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.* (2020)

Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (1998)

Ibram Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2017)

Ibram Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (2019)

Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (2019)

Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (2019)

The Center for the Study of Race and Democracy and the African American Trail Project

The Center for the Study of Race and Democracy’s mission is to promote engaged research and scholarship that focus on the ways in which issues of race and democracy impact the lives of global citizens. Through interdisciplinary scholarship, technological innovation, and public symposia, the CSRD seeks to develop an interactive model of history that fosters a robust intellectual and civic dialogue on race relations, civil rights, law, international relations, and democracy at Tufts, in Boston, and in the wider global community. For more information: <https://as.tufts.edu/csrd/>

The African American Trail Project is a collaborative public history initiative housed at Tufts University. Originally inspired by the scholarship of Tufts Professor Gerald R. Gill (1948-2007) and driven by faculty and student research, this project maps African American and African-descended public history sites across greater Boston, and throughout Massachusetts. The African American Trail Project aims to develop African American historical memory and intergenerational community, placing present-day struggles for racial justice in the context of greater Boston's historic African American, Black Native, and diasporic communities. For more information: <https://africanamericantrailproject.tufts.edu/>

Tufts Campus Resources

Tufts has created a number of community resources to support students, faculty, and staff around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The university's efforts are helmed by Chief Diversity Officers and Associate Provosts Robert Mack and Joyce Sackey, as well as the Diversity and Inclusion Leadership Council. Its programs include the "Bridging Differences Task Force," the Joint Council on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and a host of initiatives supporting students from K-12, undergraduate and graduate levels, and beyond.

Campus resources centers include the Africana Center, the Asian American Center, the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, the FIRST Resource Center, the Latino Center, the LGBT Center, and the Women's Center. To link to these communities and learn more about their ongoing work, visit:

<https://diversity.tufts.edu/what-we-do/campus-resources/>

For more information on Tufts' resources supporting diversity and inclusion, visit:

<https://diversity.tufts.edu/> and to contact the office of the Chief Diversity Officer, visit:

<https://diversity.tufts.edu/contact-us/>

Organizing, Toolkits, and Additional Resources

- [Support the Movement for Black Lives \(M4LB\)](#)
- [Alicia Garza: A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter movement](#)
- [The Reader Guide to understanding Police Abolition](#)
- [Anti-racism resources](#)
- [Black Lives Matter Resources Toolkit](#)
- [Black* Transwoman to Black Cis/Transman: An Open Letter/Poem for Trayvon and the Rest of Us](#)

Donate

- [Official George Floyd Family Fund](#)
- [Black Lives Matter Boston](#)
- [Black Visions Collective Minnesota](#)