AUNE Juneteenth Vigil

The Justice Leadership Council of AUNE recognized the movement for Black Lives by holding a community vigil on June 19, 2020. While this vigil may have been prompted by the brutal murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by several Minneapolis police officers, the date has deeper significance in our country's history. Although slavery ended in the confederate states in 1863, Texans kept people in bondage until Union soldiers arrived to Galveston by ship and announced the abolition of slavery. The former enslaved persons immediately began to celebrate with this long overdue news. Since that time descendants of American enslaved persons have celebrated this day as the statement below explains.

Juneteenth Statement
by Chevon Stewart

Thank you all for joining us today! In the African American community, this day June 19th is the day known as Juneteenth or Emancipation Day. This emancipation is due to over 12 million Africans who were kidnapped and brought to the Americas to and were then enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade (Wright, 2012). Africans who were enslaved persons had no rights as they were considered property of their masters and were thus excluded from legislative protections.

Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney in the 1857 Dred Scott case pontificated, “They [African Americans] had no rights which the White man was bound to respect “(Rubio, 2001, p.21). Although the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln on January 1st, 1863 it took two and half years for states to actually implement these measures calling for Freedom of African Americans on June 19th, 1865 in Galveston, Texas.

Despite this abolition and emancipation, a number of Black codes were written on the state level to prohibit the freedom and movement of African Americans. The onset of institutionalized racism through legalized discrimination, Jim crow laws, formation of White terrorists' groups, limited job opportunities, limited housing opportunities, limited educational opportunities presented as barriers to African American progress in America society (Leary, 2005; Wright, 2012).

Strange Fruit, a song written by Abel Meerpol and sung by Billie Holiday recognized the control and murder of black bodies in 1939 stating,

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather
For the wind to suck
For the sun to rot
For the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop
These words are so haunting. Acknowledging the horror of the lynching of Black bodies which were happening at a rate of almost one every two days during the reconstruction era. Weiner (2016) asserted that American policy is built on the history of Juridical racialism, the notion of race and law being mutually exclusive since the Civil War in the late 19th century.

According to a report from Reconstruction in America, over 2000 racial terror lynchings occurred between 1865 and 1876. In an effort to continue to control Black bodies and maintain this slave mentality, over 4400 lynchings occurred from 1877-1950. These are just the lynchings that have been recorded. The civil rights movement of the 1960’s brought the fight for social justice to the forefront. With songs sung by Mavis Staples “We shall not be moved just like a tree that stand by the water we shall not be moved” and “Lift every voice and sing” the Black National Anthem which highlighted the hope and resilience of the time:

Lift every voice and sing,  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the list'ning skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.

While we remember these atrocities, they live within the bodies of all of us whether you are oppressed or came from oppressors or hold both of those realities in your body.

The day of Juneteenth is also a celebration of African American success. There has been so much Progress in the African American community despite the racism that exists. Booker T. Washington stated, “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has to overcome while trying to succeed.”

When we look at art we have artists such as Bill T. Jones, Judith Jamison, Camille Brown, Alvin Ailey, Jean Michel Basquiat, Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, Alma Thomas, Jacob Lawrence. Writers and historians Maya Angelou, James Balwdin, Zadie Smith, Ibram Kendi,, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Black feminist writer Bell Hooks. In our LGBTQIA community activists such as Audre Lorde, Marsha P. Johnson, and Miss Major Griffin Gracy. We lived to see a Black President in office with Barack and Michele Obama.

While all of this is wonderful success as defined by Cornel West, “is being well adjusted to injustice and well adapted to indifference, then we don’t want successful leaders. We want GREAT LEADERS who love the people enough and respect the people enough to be unbought, unbound, unafraid, and unintimated to tell the truth.” The truth as we know today is that racism still exists on an institutional level, mezzo, and micro levels. Over the past three weeks our nation and the international community have come together protesting the murder of Black people of various social locations men, women, children and those in our LGBTQIA community by police or by people who state they are protecting their community without taking the least restrictive measures. Over the past few months we’ve had the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Rayshard Brooks, and Breonna Taylor. As well as recent deaths due to other forms of violence against trans
women Riah Milton and Dominique Fells. Many of these deaths Black people were doing ordinary things like running, sitting in a car, or sleeping in their home. Over the past week Robert Fuller and Malcom Harsch 2 Black men in southern California were found hanging from a tree.

In 2020, through this notion of Juridical racialism we have the modern form of lynching through violent and unjustifiable acts conducted by police officers. The over policing of Black bodies which leads to the murder of Black People by the police and other vigilantes who claim to be protecting their neighborhoods. We are in a health crisis. Today my hope is to honor these lives of Black People who have been murdered, remember that Black Lives Matter, and speak to how we can take action as an AUNE community.

References


Juneteenth Statement by K. Waller

I first crafted these words during the uprisings that began in Minneapolis in May 2020, and a version of it was read at the vigil. I wrote this feeling the depth of the protester’s pain, masked as anger, and understood. I wrote this because the obsession with police brutality ignores the economic, social, political, educational, health, and environmental brutality that my people endure every day. I wrote it so Antioch could never say it didn’t know.

Fire, Water, and Air by K. Waller

Fannie Lou Hamer (1962) said it best, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." Me, too, Ms. Fannie. I'm sick and tired of waiting for NPR to have a story about Black people that does not involve gentrification, incarceration, discrimination or any other-ation word. I'm sick and tired of white always being the default so I can never find “flesh tone” bandages or bras. I'm sick and tired of people being surprised when they learn I am Black and smart, as if the two were mutually exclusive. I'm damn sure sick and tired of having to explain to my peers - and some professors - why it is not OK to run a research project where 95% of the participants are white, college-educated, middle or upper class women. Some things can't be explained away under the guise of "limitations." Intentionality matters.

I'm sick and tired of what feels like an endless ‘fight’ for Antioch to increase the faculty, student, and staff representation of traditionally underrepresented groups, and for professors to use our authors and researchers with integrity, more than just a tacked-on quote by Chief Sitting Bull. I’m baffled why
it appears I will be only the third Black person to graduate with a PhD in Environmental Studies in the 45 history of the program! I was confused when two of my white female cohort members told me how they were **approached** and encouraged to apply for the 'minority' scholarship, one that I knew nothing about at the time. I'm tired of the countless emails, letters, conversations, and meetings that only lead to frustrating circles of stagnation. I recall simply asking, “What is the diversity plan? How many Black people go to Antioch?” - our fine institution committed to **social justice** – and being told to go to legal counsel if I couldn’t find what I was looking for.

These are the types of miniature struggles that accumulate and impact the health and well-being of marginalized groups. William Smith (2003), who describes this as racial battle fatigue, says its pervasiveness is common in historically white spaces. But these ‘micro-fights’ don’t make headlines, the stressors are never caught on video, only we see the cries we shed, sitting exhausted and alone. Our struggles are silent. Who will listen? In fact, I have to wonder if there would even be any discussion about ‘white privilege’ and ‘healing the nation’ had the officer only sat on George Floyd's neck for 5 minutes or 6…just long enough to subdue the animal, to hurt his manhood, but without leaving a mark. He did resist arrest, after all…they always do.

George Floyd is not a martyr. He was just another brother trying to survive in a country that deems him expendable, unless he is scoring points, making folks dance, or passing laws to benefit the rich. Had he not died - on video - his story would be the same story as so much of Black America: Struggle. Joy. Fear. Laughter. Defiance. Family. Loss. Work. Love…because we are human, too. The tragedy of this story is not only that his children will never hear their father’s voice again or that countless businesses were destroyed and protesters arrested. How tragic it was that Black America felt forced to talk in the only language white America seems to understand: Property. America values property. We were brought here as property and it is only when we destroy property that we are heard. Otherwise our tears and pain remain invisible. How sad that most of white America doesn’t understand their complicity or how their badge of whiteness protects them from being imprisoned, shelters them from generational poverty, or prevents an officer’s knee on their neck. Perhaps the real tragedy is that White America is still blind to the many ways they crush the breath out of our bodies every single day.

I’m surprised by universities and their chancellors who dash to the June 19th finish line and think they deserve a medal for finally recognizing a day that we’ve been celebrating for over 150 years. I’m surprised, Antioch, but not surprised. As a general rule I have little faith in pep rallies masked as vigils, when there is no structural change to follow. I have no patience for those who shake their head at looting, but forget that it was White America that looted this land from the native people. And then looted us to the land. We learned it from you! America is the best teacher. I roll my eyes at those who provide pity over policy. I get frustrated by the sincere, furrowed brows of concerned parties who continue to make ZERO effort to support our institutions, our organizations, our schools, or our businesses...us. I confess I harbor a disdain for people who can’t wait for things to just ‘get back to normal,’ to tear off their masks and return to their false privileged peace, all the while ignoring our steady fight against the virus of systemic inequities. Where is the vaccine for that?

I don’t give a damn about politicians who ‘take a knee’ for a photo op but enact legislation that locks us up for offenses that the average white boy would walk away from and the average white girl could smile her way out of. I am indifferent to CEO’s whose PR department write contrite letters but continue to pay their hourly workers survival level wages. Because so much of this is about economics. The reality is, my friends, that a Black man is worth more dead or jailed than alive. $30,000 to lock him up. And did you forget the rest of the script? We’ve seen this drama played out so many times: a police killing of an unarmed Black person, a settlement to the family, a nice sum for the lawyers, and a quieting down until it happens again. Maybe the camera won't catch it at just the right angle, but it will happen again. And again. And again. Until the white patriarchal supremacy embedded in this nation is destroyed. Or burned to the ground. And let’s admit it, the
reason why this is a national conversation is not because of George Floyd...why haven’t all the other dead Black bodies been trending? Maybe it’s because white folks are protesting in the streets and their lives are inherently worth more. Maybe it's because the continual loop of the video means George Floyd must die again and again, just to satisfy America’s dark appetite for visual violence against us. More than likely, though, there is 24 hour lip service because all those shouts and flames and fires scare people. Fire is not like water where you can get in a boat and row away. You can't even make your way to higher ground. A fire consumes everything in its path, from a flicker to an ash in less than 8 minutes and 46 seconds.