

WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL: AN EXAMINATION OF THE FREEDOM NOT AFFORDED TO ME

By Leslie Ekpe, Texas Christian University

'You see that line over there? Yeah, the red one. See, I can't cross it. Why, you ask? It speaks to the segregation I've been up against all my life. You see, the red line is the reason we lose out on personal wealth in the thousands every year. It's the reason mortgage lenders commonly reject loans for my people. That red line explains persistent racial inequality that infiltrates our educational systems. I guess you can say the red line speaks to the freedom not afforded to me.' -Leslie Ekpe

Historic and continuing displacement, discrimination, and racism across the country tend to impede communities of color from advancing. Through racially discriminatory practices, redlining prohibits thousands of individuals from becoming homeowners. Such unjust policies are part of a long tradition of inequality that has led to the still-observed disparities among our nations' Black populations.

It would be 490 years before post-secondary administrators would appreciate the dawning of Juneteenth and its importance of freedom. The year is now 2020, and protests have broken out in every state in the country and various countries around the world regarding the brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and countless other murders at the hands of the police. Juneteenth appeared this year in the form of the biggest civil rights movement since the 1960s. The fight for justice looks oddly familiar – as if history somehow has a way of repeating itself.

On August 2, 1776, four White men signed the Declaration of Independence, claiming:

'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

This document would be used for hundreds of years to reiterate the idea of being free in America. However, the Declaration of Independence was signed while my ancestors were enslaved. The document spoke to only those that were seen free or dare must I say, White. It would not be until eighty-nine years after the Declaration of Independence, that slavery would be abolished. But in 1776, freedom did not ring for the Black population of America. For most African Americans, it would take countless years and a bloody civil war to earn their 'unalienable freedoms', and hundreds of years of brave demonstrations before the complete exercise of those rights.

TIME Magazine states, "American independence celebrations on July 4, are a reminder of the country's hypocrisy on the issue of freedom. As slavery has played a crucial role in the nation's history, even today, America's history of racism is still being written, while other forms of modern-day slavery persist in the U.S. and around the globe."

Nowadays, it feels as though the Black community's immobile state has been normalized, recognized as reality rather than a disaster that must be fought as vigorously as a pandemic would be.

The American Dream is not afforded to me because of my skin color. In Early America, poor people fought every day for their independence – in minute but significant ways. History has shown that the promise of equality and human rights – life, fairness, and the pursuit of happiness – was not offered to Blacks, even to the present day.

But forget about the papers signifying that 'we are free,' can we discuss what is happening in America today? It is time to dismantle the discriminatory systems that have long enabled forms of prejudice that create barriers for the Black community. If something is not done now, history, will once again, repeat itself.

So, how far have we come? How do Black Americans celebrate independence when our hands are tied to the oppressive state of the nation?

Protests are erupting across the nation as more evidence of the brutal treatment of Black communities continue to plague the U.S. I appreciate the sentiments proposed around the need for change. However, I am weary that it all sounds too good to be true. I am concerned that the promises of change are just pacifying statements of inaction.

The American slave system legacy is still very much a part of our lives. Racial views of White supremacy and Black inferiority have been an intrinsic feature of the American political landscape, and the air we all breathe is also a feature of it.

Will America ever wake up to the constant injustices afflicting Black Americans?

After decades, virtually nothing has been done to tackle racial and economic inequality. Words, yes; action, not so much. Those with the power to bring about meaningful change have failed to do so. And the 'freedom' that rings still bleeds Black blood. We must work together to change a social practice or a social structure and, until we do, the discriminatory systems will continue to operate, and justice will only be a dream.

So, I ask, what freedom is genuinely afforded to me? Am I truly free?

As we search and continue to wait for a vaccine for the Coronavirus (COVID- 19), I hope that we find a vaccine that will one day make Black people free from injustices everywhere.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leslie Ekpe is a Ph.D. student at Texas Christian University, where she is pursuing her degree in Higher Educational Leadership. Her work aims to promote access, foster exposure, engagement, and inclusive opportunities for underrepresented students at the K-12 and post-secondary education levels. Her research interests include Black women in leadership, racial disparities within standardized testing, student activism in the digital age, race in K-12 education and fairness within intercollegiate athletics.

Are you interested in submitting an essay or op-ed for the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice? [Read the submission guidelines here](#) and reach out to Director for Programs and Communications, Brandy Jones at brandy.jones@gse.rutgers.edu.

