

LAIS Program Director's Statement Concerning the Killing of George Floyd, and More

A few days ago, the world witnessed an horrific scene. A white police officer, undaunted, tortured an unarmed African American man while he was handcuffed, face down to the floor, pleading for his life, until he stopped breathing. All this happened in daylight and in public, under the gaze of other police officers who not only did nothing to stop the crime but were complicit. George Floyd's death is just the last in a succession of racist crimes against black people, which have remained unaccounted for.

The Program in Latin American and Iberian Studies (LAIS) at UCSB stands in outrage and solidarity with the family of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and all other African Americans killed by police officers and white supremacists. Most of these crimes were possible because police officers knew they were unlikely to be held accountable for them; because a century and a half after the abolition of slavery, black lives continue not to matter.

LAIS stands in support of street protestors, because street protest is the only way left for citizens to express their demands for justice, having been failed by the institutions that are supposed to provide it. Floyd's last words — "I can't breathe", "let me breathe" — which were the same as those uttered by other African Americans who met similar deaths in the hands of the police, such as Eric Garner, resound now in street protests. These words lay bare the extent to which the right that black people are demanding is the most basic one: the right to exist. And they expose the clamorous failure of U.S. democracy to guarantee this basic right. This fact contaminates our entire society, not just a part of it. In the larger scope of history — because Blacks Lives Matter is now a global movement — five centuries of disregard for the life, rights, and dignity of African-descended people is more than enough.

These crimes occurred at a moment in which a pandemic is also disproportionately taking the lives of African American and Latinx communities, who happen to be both "essential workers," and, along with Native Americans, are the ones most exposed to falling sick due to structural inequalities in the access to health and public services. This is not a mere coincidence, rather it lays bare yet another truth: the extent to which structural racism is in itself "a public health emergency," as the Goleta City Council put it.

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I encourage all the members of our LAIS community, faculty affiliates, students and staff, and the larger campus, to take this moment of grief and outrage as an opportunity to strengthen our commitment to build a society in which every life matters, a society in which each and every person has the same opportunities to enjoy good health, education, and dignity. More than ever, we must put our research and teaching to the service of this end.

Finally, I encourage everyone to read the eloquent statement prepared by our colleagues from the Department of Black Studies, several of whom are among our dearest LAIS faculty affiliates: <https://www.blackstudies.ucsb.edu/news/announcement/460>

Sincerely,

Cecilia Mendez Gastelumendi

LAIS Program Director

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