
June 10, 2020

SALSA Statement in Support of Black Lives Matter and Condemning Structural Violence

The Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) adds its voice to that of global anti-racist protesters and those who decry the violation of human rights as we all engage this defining struggle of our time. SALSA's mission is to promote and safeguard sound and ethical research on issues related to the region of lowland South America, its peoples, and its environments, and to promote the education of students and the general public on these issues. In recent months we have denounced the impact of racist government policies in Brazil on the indigenous Amazonian and Quilombo populations of African descent.

Today, we claim that the mass killing of Black and brown bodies, directly by police and other violence and indirectly by the structural and institutional violence of unequal access to health care and education, cries out for rectification in the United States as well. Due in large part to the explicit support of the United States government, racist violence has increased in intensity and virulence. Racists feel themselves supported by state actors and organizations—much as our experts have denounced for the Brazilian case. We now echo the call that Black Lives Matter.

As scholars, we are in a strong position to expose the deep legacies and structures of racism that otherwise might be invisible. It is our responsibility to make these deep structures visible. Until they are made starkly visible, the very existence of these structures and barriers is easy to deny. The legacies of racism and struggles against them are interlocking persistent forms of violence. They manifest in inequalities and injustice, not only within the systems of policing as the recent, tragic death of George Floyd painfully exposed, but also in experiences of health and well-being, land and livelihoods, and popular narratives and imagery.

We must, for example, expose how the historically racist application of U.S. federal land laws leads to the increased deaths today of Black and brown people from coronavirus. The U.S. federal government began regulating transfer of conquered Indigenous lands to white people as early as the Land Ordinance of 1785, and continued with such laws as the Land Acts of 1804, 1820, and 1832, and the Homestead Acts of 1862 and 1909. All of these acts mandated that the U.S. federal government survey conquered territories, divide them into lots, and either sell them at reduced prices or give them away to settlers. Throughout most of the two-hundred-year history of these land transfers, white people—mainly men—could obtain land from the federal government, but people of African, Asian, Native, or Spanish ancestry were barred from legal title to homestead lands. This resulted in the massive accumulation of land capital by white people, and the development over two centuries of huge economic inequalities. As capital is passed from generation to generation, the inequalities have increased and become more pronounced.

In the U.S., the application of federal law over centuries to create white economic and political supremacy has resulted in deeply unequal access to health care, which is a manifestation of structural violence and racism. Health care is enormously expensive in the U.S., a privilege of the privileged. It stands to reason that living in a society that has denied Black and brown people equal access to capital for centuries, and where health care is a privilege rather than a right, white people have superior access to health care, while Black and brown people struggle to get even basic primary care. The history of structural and institutional inequality is manifest in vastly unequal outcomes during the coronavirus epidemic as Black and brown people either have no access to health care, or limited access to inferior care. Many are reluctant to seek treatment due to the costs, and thus seek treatment later and receive worse treatment. The unequal death rates of Black and white people during the coronavirus epidemic is a result of structural inequalities developed over centuries of colonialism and racism.

This is a classic example of what anthropologists call “structural violence,” death and harm resulting from the unequal structuring of state power and wealth. The over-representation of Black and brown Americans in police killings that have sparked protests around the world is another clear example of structural violence in the U.S. It is our responsibility as scholars to expose these racist inequities. If not us, then who?

To strengthen our efforts at promoting and practicing racial justice, the leadership of SALSA commits to the creation and empowerment of a committee of SALSA members to study and make recommendations for how the Society can dismantle any barriers of entry for Indigenous and Afro-descendant students, scholars, activists, and community leaders. In the meantime, SALSA members will continue to inject depth and nuance into disciplinary and public accounts of racism, through our rigorous scholarship. Through our pedagogy, we will continue to expose histories and current practices of structural violence, racism, and oppression. Finally, through our Public Issues and Action Committee, we will continue to encourage public attention and action to address injustice, harmful policies, and human rights violations.



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