



Emancipated But Not Free

By AAWA Member Katerina Canyon

Emancipated but not Free Katerina Canyon I graduated high school on Juneteenth 1986. That was the first time I heard of Juneteenth. My mother told me it was an emancipation holiday celebrated in the south. Since then, I have had over 30 years to ponder emancipation and what it has meant to my life, the lives of those around me, and the lives of Blacks in this country, and nearly everywhere I look, I see multiple attempts to re-enslave us, disenfranchise us, and I see strategic systems in place to keep us below the poverty level.



1. Blacks are harassed and killed by the police at higher rates. In 1704, the first slave patrol was created in the Carolinas. Slave patrols were meant to catch and return runaway slaves. That system has developed into the police systems we have today. According to Pew Research, majorities of both Black and white Americans say Black people are treated less fairly than whites in dealing with the police by the criminal justice system as a whole, yet this system is still in place. Blacks make up 13.4 percent of the population, yet according to the U.S. Department of Justice, we make up 21.4% of police interactions. Washington Post reported that in 2021, 38% of people killed by the police were Black. That is twice the percentage of whites that were killed.

2. Blacks die at a higher rate. According to the Marshall Project, Blacks die younger at almost every age. In 2019, 1 in 5 Black deaths happened earlier than would have been expected for whites. The infant mortality rate for Blacks was twice that of whites.

3. The government takes Black children at a higher rate. 23% of children in foster care are Black. It is widely acknowledged that children in foster care often face poor outcomes, including arrest, homelessness, drugs, and prison. It is so widely acknowledged that the process has been coined as the foster care to prison pipeline.

4. Blacks are often disenfranchised. 1 in 13 Blacks in the country cannot vote due to felony conviction laws.

These laws affect Blacks at a higher rate than whites. These laws also disenfranchise potential Black jurors. If you know someone who has been convicted of a crime, you are less likely to be accepted on a jury, and if you are looking at 1 in 13, it is hard not to know someone who has not been convicted of something. These are just a few things I have learned over the years when I contemplate what it means to be an emancipated Black person. We are free in many ways. For instance, I am free to write this reflection, but we are still enslaved in the ways I discuss above. It seems like we cannot just be free to be our best selves without struggling to do so. There is often a person or system in front of us trying to get in our way. Injustices abound, and we have to face them every day. We just have to fight and keep moving forward.