**Racial Disparities and their History in Minnesota – in brief**

Minnesota, like all States, has a long and deeply-embedded history of race-based privileges and oppressions. That history, combined with a general lack of knowledge among European-American Minnesotans of our history and its current impact, is a significant cause of the high level of racial disparities in Minnesota today. In many fields, including school success, employment, incarceration, mortgage lending, healthcare, human service delivery, and others., Minnesota’s racial disparities rank as worst or near-worst in the nation.

Most of us are familiar with Minnesota’s positive role in opposing racism through fielding of troops in the Civil War and efforts, both in Minnesota and in the South, during the Civil Rights Era a hundred years later. However, at its core, Minnesota’s history is a history of conquest and genocide, racial segregation and discrimination, that continues to benefit European-American Minnesotans at the expense of Minnesotans who are people of color.

**Dispossession, Genocide, Removal and Impoverishment of Native Americans**

At the times the US came to claim certain rights to Minnesota (a Dakota word), this area was the ancestral homeland of the Dakota peoples and, more recently, in northern Minnesota, the homeland of certain bands of Anishinaabe (“Ojibwe” or “Chippewa” peoples). In connection with US acquisition of Minnesota, the Dakota and Anishinaabe experienced a devastating combination of: dispossession through unauthorized encroachment, “treaties” of questionable validity; subsequent treaty violations by the US; the plying of alcohol, and exploitative practices by business “entrepreneurs .” The US and the Territorial (later State) governments, urged on by European-American traders and settlers, engaged in conscious starvation of indigenous peoples, intentional exposure to infectious diseases, grossly inhuman massacres of Native communities (e.g. Sandy Lake), and outright military warfare. In a context of intentional starvation by US officials and multitudes of other injustices, some of the Dakota people struck out. The ensuing war cost hundreds of lives on both sides and resulted in the simultaneous hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato on the day after Christmas, 1862 – the largest mass execution in US history.

Dakota women, children and elders were force-marched 150 miles in bitter winter storms to a concentration camp directly below Fort Snelling. Governor Ramsey placed a large bounty on the scalps of Dakota peoples. At popular urging, Colonel Sibley led a number of search-and-destroy campaigns into the Dakota Territory to kill Dakota people fleeing Minnesota. Those women and children who survived the conditions of their imprisonment at Fort Selling were shipped into permanent exile on a tract of barren land, and all Dakota people were banished from the State of Minnesota. The majority of Dakota descendants are still living in exile, most in situations of dire impoverishment.

The Anishinaabe were also subjected to massive dispossession, violence and social disruption. Early in the history of US occupation of Minnesota, timber barons directed the deforestation of along the St Croix River and later across the native forest-lands State-wide. They asked no one’s permission to take the trees, they paid no one for the trees that they cut, and their actions ravaged the forest ecosystem, producing wide-ranging fires, permanent disappearance of the topsoil, and great loss of food and habitat for indigenous communities as well as animal life in all its forms.

Like the Dakota, Anishinaabe have been targets of government-sponsored and church-run campaigns to destroy their culture, their languages and their families (see the history of indigenous children being forcibly held at “Indian boarding schools”).

Impoverishment is wide-spread on the reservations where most of the indigenous peoples of Minnesota live, and in urban areas indigenous communities typically have the highest rate of impoverishment among all racial-ethnic groups.

The assaults on indigenous cultural worldview and Native America’s rights of self-determination continue. Native efforts to decolonize their communities, to reclaim their languages, and to pass along their culture to the children are underway, as are efforts to speak the truth of Minnesota’s history and to begin to address the injustices of the past 200 years of US rule over their homelands and their peoples.

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**Discrimination, Violence and Injustices against African American Minnesotans**

NOTE: The closing day of the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference UCC is the anniversary date of the Duluth lynching described below.

Contrary to dominant perspectives, early white domination of Minnesota relied on enslaved African-Americans to provide the uncompensated forced labor that enabled Fort Snelling to function and expand. (US Army officers brought their slaves up the Mississippi River with them, and the United States provided a $2,000 stipend to officers assigned to positions in Indian Territory to allow them to purchase an additional enslaved African-American to bring with them. Existing African-American families downriver, including the first family of Dred Scott, were ripped apart in this process.)

Meanwhile European-American profiteers and their towns along the St Croix River found there was money to be made in tourism – in encouraging upper-class Southerners to come north in the summer to enjoy the cooler temperatures and scenic beauty of the St Croix. The tourists, of course, would bring with them those enslaved African-Americans whose uncompensated services made it possible for the slaveholders’ to maintain their daily lifestyles. Given the importance of the tourist trade to European-American Minnesotans, a southern-styled social order was replicated in various ways. The tourist towns were maintained as “white space” with virtually no residents of color. In response to slaveholders’ fears of African-American escapes from slavery, the government passed its own, harsher version of the Fugitive Slave Act and made efforts to actively enforce it. With a few notable exceptions, the Underground Railroad sought to reach Canada primarily via states east or west of Minnesota rather than risk the hostility of many European-American officials and citizens. And when Minnesota became a State in 1857, after debate, the right to vote was limited to white men only.

Even after the Civil War Constitutional Amendments technically gave them the right to vote, African-American Minnesotans were subject to structures of pervasive inequality. Virtually all African Americans in Minnesota were confined to certain high-risk, menial-labor jobs and experienced violence and exclusion from dominant society. On June 15, 1920 the white citizenry of Duluth lynched three African-American men amidst much publicity and wide-spread support. The lynching built on “sun-down town” policies of cities and towns across Minnesota – policies that were also enforced with violence and terrorism.

By both court decision and general practice, only white people were allowed to take advantage of the Homestead Act, thereby acquiring title to portions of land recently taken from indigenous peoples.

Throughout our Minnesota history, the portrayal of African Americans in church and theatrical minstrelsy shows, in the white media, in school and university textbooks, and in the every-day culture of jokes and discourse has been full of negative stereotypes. As the fishing and tourism industry expanded into the Lakes District, the accepted practice among whites was to exclude Africa Americans from economic participation. A significant portion of the early tourists visiting the Bay Lake area were from Kansas City, and their “whites-only” attitudes had a formative impact as the tourist industry unfolded. Employment was limited to European-Americans. Virtually all non-reservation lands were limited to “white-only” ownership through restrictive covenants in deeds. From sheriffs to restaurant servers to average residents on the streets, African American travelers most often experienced a sense of non-belonging and caution – threat and violence. Some of us here today have the experience of going “up north” for vacations. Do we hold in mind, when we speak of our experiences, how those social contexts have been structured to exclude African Americans and to render indigenous peoples of that land invisible to us?

The social structure of Minnesota, including the major cities, was heavily segregated in virtually all spheres, with disproportionate opportunities and benefits available to European-American Minnesotans and wide-spread disadvantages for African-American Minnesotans. During the late 1950’s into the 1970’s the African-American community and its allies challenged many of the manifestations of racial discrimination in Minnesota. As a result, a number of Africa-Americans have become the first to hold particular roles in Minnesota. However the huge race-based disparities in income and wealth, educational success and health, police profiling and mass incarceration, etc, indicate that European-American Minnesotans are receiving a significant range of benefits from Minnesota’s dominant economic and cultural system which African-American Minnesotans, on the whole, are not. In its most recent data, the Minnesota Council of Black Minnesotans reports that, on the average, White Minnesotans have approximately twenty times the net worth of Black Minnesotans.

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Also see:

Biographies and autobiographies of numerous Black Minnesotans including A. Philip Randolph, Josie Johnson, and Syl Jones

**Note Attachment: Article 7 of the 1857 Minnesota Constitution regarding enfranchisement base on race.**

**See below – next page.**

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