

Critical Education

Volume 8 Number 2

February 1, 2017

ISSN 1920-4125

Black Lives Matter Reflections on Ferguson and Creating Safe Spaces for Black Students

Mariah Bender
Saint Louis University

Citation: Bender, M. (2017). Black Lives Matter: Reflections on Ferguson and creating safe spaces for Black students. *Critical Education*, 8(2), 11-16. Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186221>

Critical Education Special Issue – The Legacy of Ferguson: A Referendum on Citizenship Denied

Abstract

Higher education, and more specifically, teacher education, despite claims of being a liberal progressive space is entrenched in White privilege. This essay recounts my experiences as a Black woman traversing activism in the #OccupySLU movement and my pre-dominantly White pre-service teacher education program. I share how the White gaze reinforces power regardless of claims to do otherwise.



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Critical Education*, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or *Critical Education*. *Critical Education* is published by the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia. Articles are indexed by EBSCO Education Research Complete and Directory of Open Access Journals.

12 *Critical Education*

On August 9, 2014, I first saw the tweets about a father holding a sign claiming the police just murdered his son, I felt disturbed. The reality is that the murders of Black and Brown people by police are so frequently documented I initially felt desensitized. Which led me to a deeper reflective question of what conditions exist in society that allow the death of Black and Brown people to be the norm—so much that my the first response to the incident was to “just keep scrolling”? The mechanism of “just keep scrolling” functions as a means of survival in this culture for a Black person like myself. In America, the devaluation of Black life is so pervasive that if I were to become intensely emotional after every death (which by the hands of police is every 28 hours), I would not be able to survive. As Black people, our entire existence in white spaces is based on our survival and constant resistance at all levels. Ferguson, which is in North County Saint Louis, only a few miles from where I live, confirmed my knowledge of Saint Louis racial politics. The racial segregation is skewed so that North of the city is mainly Black and disenfranchised, and the South and West of the city is extremely white. Ultimately, the fact that all the reporting and exposure of the murder initially came from social media helped to startup a movement calling for justice for Mike Brown.

As social media exploded with a photo of Mike’s body and a pool of blood lying in the street which was retweeted again and again, people got the message of the importance of justice for Michael and his family. Although social media can be a powerful tool, for me it was sensory overload. Was there no privacy for his family and friends who would not have wanted to see their child’s body online? I now realize that the image is being used as a tool to shock America into consciousness. The shock value of grabs viewers from complacency and forces them to take a stance, the now famous “Which side are you on?” further validates the image.

When I returned back to my teacher education program at Saint Louis University (SLU), I kept asking myself: “What am I going to tell my Black students? Who I can tell them to go to for help when distressed?” They can’t go to their neighbors like Reneisha McBride who was shot dead by a white man while seeking help after a car crash in Detroit. Students cannot go to fellow patrons in stores like Eric Crawford shot dead in Walmart after walking around with a toy gun. And students definitely cannot go to police officers who murdered Ezell Ford, Kajieme Powell, Michael Brown Jr, Vonderrit Myers Jr, Eric Garner, Amadou Diallou—all unarmed. So again, where are my Black students supposed to seek refuge in this country in which their Blackness is threatening to the white supremacist structure?

As I headed into Fall semester, I looked to my university for guidance, support, and a space to process these events but more importantly to search for tools on how to have these conversations with my future Black students. I ultimately felt unprepared to discuss racism in the classroom and the implications of the events in Ferguson. Yet, I was eager to finally have this kind of conversation.

While, I missed the *Teaching Ferguson* event sponsored by the School of Education, I appreciated the effort. I was proud to be a part of a department that was willing to be bold and respond to the events taking place a mere 9 miles from Saint Louis University’s midtown campus. Then, disappointment sunk in. Classes returned to normal, business as usual, field experience logs, service learning reflection, and business as usual attitude in SLU teacher education classes. And I wondered where the discourse on Ferguson went. When is the time for us to move away from our privileged and insular lives on campus to discuss and stand up in solidarity with people only miles away? I wondered what it would take to bring the humanity and citizenship of Black Americans into classroom discussions with a critical lens. If national

discussions and the publicity of the death of an unarmed teen at the hands of police wouldn't bring these conversations about I became disenchanted with the idea that they would ever come about. It is only through race critical theories, anti-oppressive, and anti-sexist frameworks that preservice teachers can begin to comprehend the complexities in our American system.

Silence and Fear in Teacher Education

The death of Mike Brown ought to affect all of us, the publicity of his death, the rightfully directed rage and frustration at police departments as a manifestation of systematic racism within the United States, and the dehumanization of Black lives everywhere is an issue that all institutions should discuss critically. In reality, my frustration lied in the fact that a Jesuit institution that claims students that are “men and women for and with others” and who have a “higher purpose for a greater good” were eerily silent on all things. Of course, discussion came in my African American Studies courses as expected, but why not in theology, philosophy, and leadership courses as well? Why was it that the responsibility for these difficult discussion on race and privilege fell on the most underfunded and neglected departments on campus? How was it that Saint Louis University managed to snake its way out of a widespread campus effort to stand in solidarity with Black Saint Louisians whose daily lives were so threatening that the only response was to shoot them dead for “walking while black”?

In my education classes, discussions on Ferguson focused on anecdotal explanations of a professor's remembrance of life in the 1960s and the fear of protesters. Comments about how a cousin who lives in Ferguson' home value is now \$1.70. I wondered why we didn't deliberate the value of a Black life, like the one whose blood flowed in the streets for four and a half hours? Was he worth \$1.70 or \$2.00? What was his value?

Furthermore, what caused that fear my professor spoke of? Were the protesters threatening to take his life? For the Black community, the death of Mike Brown illuminated the reality and fear that unarmed Black men and youth face every day, that a person can be killed easily by those sworn to protect them. I wondered what truly caused my white professors fear of Black Americans protesting. To hear professors spew biased, ignorant, and “unintentionally racist” comments caused me to shirk in my desk and watch the clock waiting for classes to end. Maybe his fear was a response to encountering disruptions caused by the protesters, like when protestors bought tickets to the STL Symphony and interrupted the program and sung songs for freedom for Mike Brown. This same professor lamented this act of civil disobedience because “she likes the symphony.” Did a symphony performance reign as more important than racial equality? I just suggested that as an act of civil disobedience, we should be proud to see young people advocating for an end to police brutality. Each time I spoke up like that, I felt positioned to represent all Black Americans, forced to constantly challenge professors and peers to see humanity behind the protests, the humanity of Black people. I did not want to discuss the irrelevant politics or the ridiculousness of due process in a case where the killer has not even been indicted. I wanted peers to see the situation and humanity of people like Mike Brown's parents, the real frustrations of the protestors, and the fear of the young man who witnessed his death. These efforts left me fatigued and quickly disillusioned.

Ferguson October

A coalition of community activist organized Ferguson October, which included a series of protests and events scheduled throughout the month October to keep discussion of Ferguson alive. I attended one event that included a march in Downtown Saint Louis and strategy sessions with activists; I looked to my Black peers to stand with me as we participated in protests, heard from civil rights leaders, and connected with organizers combating police brutality and asserting the humanity of Black citizens. The culmination of the weekend was an interfaith coalition of speakers with keynote speaker Dr. Cornel West at SLU's campus arena. As the string of speakers rehashed familiar rhetoric speech after speech, younger activists then stood up and turned their backs to the speakers as a rejection to the repeated MLK quotations and comparison to the movements in the 1960s. Perhaps, the most poignant moment occurred when local rapper Tef Poe rightfully stated: "this ain't your mama and daddy's civil right movements." Meaning: this is not the movement of polished, well-spoken pastors and "respectability politics," because ultimately the goals of those "respectable negroes" still have failed to penetrate the white supremacist power structure. The leaders and participants in this current movement emerging from Ferguson were armed with their voices, bodies, and commitment to justice for Mike Brown. We would not tolerate one more Black life being lost to racist killer cops.

Tef touched on a very serious generational divide between the supporters and tactics of the 1960's movement and Ferguson organizers. Now, a common theme held that simply voting and participating in the political process would do little to reduce police violence within the Saint Louis area and in the United States. Racism against Black and Brown bodies has become imbedded in every major system and institution in this country. Furthermore, the overemphasis on voting ignores this structural reality. The activists understand this too well and expressed this truth in their chant: "indict, convict, send that killer cop to jail—the whole damn system is guilty as hell."

SLU: The Whole Damn System is Guilty as Hell...

On that same evening that Tef Poe addressed concerns of youth activists, the #OccupySLU movement began. Given that SLU is a part of a system built on white supremacy, imperialism, and historical gentrification of Saint Louis's midtown, local activists known as Tribe X, which also included SLU students, chose this space for a mass action in which 1500 protestors marched on campus and held nightly "teach-ins" about racism, oppression, and systematic injustices for five days. The occupation of the Clock Tower Plaza in the center of campus symbolized our attempt to fulfill our mission, which was, according to Talal Ahmad, a member of Tribe X, to "empower, educate, and organize." He further explained the reasons behind occupying Saint Louis University: "The objective of the sit-in was to bring awareness to this privileged community of the issues that the disenfranchised community has to deal with. To induce dialogue and garner support from the university to use its clout to advocate for the oppressed community outside of its bubble." Due in part to the absence of a widespread university effort to address systemic injustices that Black and Brown people face in Saint Louis and in America, the following mass marches and actions worked to remedy the prevalence of ignorance and the "violence of indifference" facing many SLU students.

During Occupy SLU, many white students felt "attacked" given the direct and uncensored conversations by Tribe members around terms they've had the privilege to ignore:

“white supremacy,” “colonialism,” “police brutality,” and “white privilege” were constantly in the conversation. Even so, the parent piranhas on SLU’s Facebook page threatened to withdraw their students given that “thugs” and “jobless bums” who were believed to be violent had taken over SLU. They fears for their children’s safety on campus. White students wrote and circulated a letter attempting to agitate the students involved in the encampment and made false claims that protestors were armed.

The actions of these students who were simply inconvenienced by the presence of protestors and the encampment failed to recognize the daily inconvenience of being a person of color at a PWI (predominately white institution). What about the emotional and mental safety for students of color on PWI where racial slurs and hate speech are the norm? The American flag which was hung upside down during the encampment struck a chord for many white students. When the flag is upside down it represents distress. Black America and especially Saint Louis is certainly in distress and has been for years. White students demanded the flag be removed, especially when it touched the ground, again prioritizing the power of property over Black life. And as we talk about citizenship as social studies teachers, when white privilege invades the spaces in which second class citizens are exercising agency it is problematic. But, Black students felt empowered by the encampment, humanized, and found communion and love in the Clock Tower Plaza. Now the plaza represented a space reclaimed by voices and bodies who were previously silenced and disregarded.

During the encampment, oftentimes I found myself engaging in one-sided conversations with white students where I, for once, was the sole voice, and it was not up to me to break things down to my white peers or “lean into the discomfort” that the plethora of diversity speaker series, diversity cabinet, political round table discussions encourage. But, for three years, I’d been leaning in, listening to ignorant, racist, privileged commentary. On October 14, 2014, we had taken back campus and claimed it as a space for Black voices to speak, for voices of the oppressors of Saint Louis University to be silenced, and for the oppressed to express frustration with university policies and the lack of solidarity from a so-called “Jesuit” school to charge students to move towards action. It was empowering, the Clock Tower at the center of SLU had become transformed into a sanctuary for Black voices; there was love, support, laughter, and difficult stories shared by all in this sacred space.

In the wake of Occupy SLU there have been meetings with administrators and Tribe members, Black Student Alliance members, and other student activists to call for change and widespread awareness on the SLU campus. In what is now titled “The Clock Tower Accords,” Tribe X, SLU President Dr. Fred Pestallo and the Black Student Alliance agreed upon 13 demands. A few of these included: An increased budget for the African American Studies program; increased financial aid resources for retention of African American students at SLU; evaluation of SLU's current scholarship programs to better serve African American populations; creation of a Race, Property, and Inequality Steering Committee; and an appointment of a Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Community Empowerment which would become a permanent position at the University. As of late, there has also been University support for student activists in the wake of a non-indictment. The University made space on campus for students to demonstrate and stand in solidarity with the Ferguson and Shaw communities, which experienced racial violence against Blacks. This level of support would never have been available prior to the occupation of campus.

Which Emergency?

As of November 2014, Governor Jay Nixon of Missouri called in the National Guard and issued a state of emergency for Missouri for 30 days. To this notion, however, I argue that Black America has been in a state of emotional, physical, spiritual, political, and economic emergency since enslaved Africans were stolen and brought to this country. Ultimately, the true meaning of the state of emergency incites a belief that protestors will somehow erupt into a violent rage and become destructive to property which is overall more important than the value of Black citizens. Property value over the value of Black lives has characterized American race relations historically. As critical scholars, it is our duty to provide spaces for students to engage in critical dialogue. We, as teachers, must recognize these systems of oppression and give students the tools to analyze these power structures and forms of injustice worldwide and to destroy the systems of white supremacy, imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, able-ism, and all other “isms,” which dehumanize all groups that have been “otherized” historically.

Author

Mariah Bender is an undergraduate student in education at Saint Louis University.

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

Editors

Stephen Petrina, *University of British Columbia*
Sandra Mathison, *University of British Columbia*
E. Wayne Ross, *University of British Columbia*

Associate Editors

Abraham P. DeLeon, *University of Texas at San Antonio*
Adam Renner, 1970-2010

Editorial Collective

Faith Ann Agostinone, *Aurora University*
Wayne Au, *University of Washington, Bothell*
Jeff Bale, *University of Toronto*
Theodorea Regina Berry, *U of Texas, San Antonio*
Amy Brown, *University of Pennsylvania*
Kristen Buras, *Georgia State University*
Paul R. Carr, *Université du Québec en Outaouais*
Lisa Cary, *Murdoch University*
Anthony J. Castro, *University of Missouri, Columbia*
Alexander Cuenca, *Saint Louis University*
Noah De Lissovoy, *The University of Texas, Austin*
Kent den Heyer, *University of Alberta*
Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*
Stephen C. Fleury, *Le Moyne College*
Derek R. Ford, *Syracuse University*
Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*
Melissa Freeman, *University of Georgia*
David Gabbard, *Boise State University*
Rich Gibson, *San Diego State University*
Rebecca Goldstein, *Montclair State University*
Julie Gorlewski, *SUNY at New Paltz*
Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*
Sandy Grande, *Connecticut College*
Todd S. Hawley, *Kent State University*
Matt Hern, *Vancouver, Canada*
Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*
Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *University of Auckland*
Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*
Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*
Philip E. Kovacs, *University of Alabama, Huntsville*
Ravi Kumar, *South Asia University*
Saville Kushner, *University of Auckland*
Zeus Leonardo, *University of California, Berkeley*
John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*
Darren E. Lund, *University of Calgary*
Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*
Gregory Martin, *University of Technology, Sydney*
Rebecca Martusewicz, *Eastern Michigan University*
Cris Mayo, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*
Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*
Peter McLaren, *University of California, Los Angeles*
João Paraskeva, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Jill A. Pinkney Pastrana, *U of Minnesota, Duluth*
Brad J. Porfilio, *California State University, East Bay*
Kenneth J. Saltman, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY at Plattsburgh*
Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*
Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*
John Smyth, *University of Huddersfield*
Mark Stern, *Colgate University*
Beth Sondel, *North Carolina State University*
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University, Harrisburg*
Linda Ware, *SUNY at Geneseo*