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## *Hope and Persistence: The Legacy of Ferguson*

### *Introduction to a Special Issue of Critical Education – The Legacy of Ferguson: A Referendum on Citizenship Denied*

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

#### **Abstract**

*This special issue of Critical Education, entitled “The Legacy of Ferguson: A Referendum on Citizenship Denied,” presents papers about Ferguson, several of which were presented as part of a panel on Ferguson held at the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) conference of the National Council for the Social Studies in 2015. We have added articles were to address issues in Baltimore and to reflect back on Ferguson two years later. Alex Cuenca and I worked as co-editors on this project. As we arranged these pieces, we felt struck with an overwhelming sense of purpose. We have to keep this conversation real and alive. So with hope in our hearts and hands ready to toil with patience and persistence, we invite you to join the struggle, because Black Lives Matter.*



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The hunger strike of Jonathan Butler at the University of Missouri began on Monday, November 2, 2015 at 8:29 a.m. in the morning. Some say that the dispute between Black students at Mizzou and the administration occurred as a result of the rather indifferent response from then System President Tim Wolfe to a student protest at the homecoming parade. (The University of Missouri boasts that it invented the whole homecoming tradition. So, the parade and all the homecoming celebrations are seen as a big deal.) Still in his car, President Wolfe ignored the protesters as his driver tried to push them out of the way by accelerating. These students called themselves ConcernedStudent1950, a remembrance of the year that African-Americans were allowed entry into the Missouri flagship university.

Some say the dispute was spurred on by a letter written by the Missouri Association Student President, Peyton Head, in which he described how a group of White students drove up to him and yelled racial epithets. Or perhaps it was the swastika that had been drawn on the wall of a resident hall with the word “heil.” Or when members of the Legion of Black Collegians were interrupted by an intoxicated White man who hurled a litany of racial slurs at them. All of these events occurring in the months prior to the strike.

Some say that agreements had been reached between students and the administration, the year before. The students protested in a sign of solidarity with the family of Michael Brown and those who converged on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. I remember this protest well. Our students dressed in black laid down on the concrete near the side entrance of the library. When I saw them, I stood in stunned silence. Our students “played dead,” each body representing thousands of Black men and women killed by police officers, by a system of racism that destroys hopes and dreams of Black children and families, and by the always present, but sometimes invisible racial contract that affords the rights of citizenship only for some and not others. The administration agreed to make reforms. A dialogue was established, focus groups were called, and change looked possible. A year later, nothing changed. Things actually became worse. Acts of racism, systemic inequity, and social justice just became more visible.

I remember sitting in my office late on Wednesday evening trying to figure out what was happening with the student protests. The group shared information almost exclusively on Facebook and Twitter. Admittedly, I rarely used either of these mediums. I had seen the campsite where the group’s headquarters had been earlier that day. In fact, my office was just one block away. As I scrolled through Facebook and Twitter posts, watched videos, and asked a few of the students I knew, I finally understood why the students had called for the resignation of President Wolfe. Then I realized that few of my colleagues were supporting our students or even talking about what was occurring. So, that night I wrote a letter to send to every member in my department. In it, I stated the following:

As I write this, just one block away from my office a group of African American students and allies sit among a small assortment of tents—some holding laptops, others clinging to their jackets. Tonight one COE graduate student, Jonathan Butler, goes without food. His quest involves the removal and replacement of UM System President Tim Wolfe. Much has happened and continues to transpire concerning this and other student-led movements. As a faculty member in this department, as a member of MU community, I can no longer afford to be ignorant of the efforts of our students to end social and racial injustice on this campus. To exist in the state of not being aware would leave me without a sense of ethics or

integrity for what I believe in as an educator and scholar.

As soon as I sent that e-mail, which was somewhere around midnight, I walked to the campsite and asked how I could help. I recognized some of my undergraduate students there and a few of the graduate students from some of my classes. I just shook my head and thought, *How can we tolerate this? How can we stand by let racial injustice continue to persist?*

The University of Missouri President Tim Wolfe resigned seven days after the strike began and two days after the Tiger football team announced it was going to stop playing until the hunger strike ended. The meeting of the Board Curators was overflowing with people. So much so that I sat outside the door and listened to the proceedings. Wolfe said, “To our students: from Concerned Student 1950 to our grad students, football players, and other students, the frustration and anger that I see is clear, real, and I don’t doubt it for a second.” He spoke about his love for the state and the university and his hope that people could listen to each other. Then the Board of Curators moved into closed session. I returned to my car and texted my graduate students who were at the campsite in support of Jonathan Butler. I sent them quotes from the resignation speech. Then I put my head against the steering wheel and cried.

Could real change be possible now?

### **Hope and Persistence**

Yale University, Ithaca College, Purdue University, Claremont McKenna College, Dartmouth College, Emory University, Georgetown University, Boston University, University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa, Vanderbilt University, Princeton University, University of California-Berkeley...

At each of these institutions of higher learning, college students demonstrated against racial injustice. A tide of racial awareness seemed to be sweeping across the landscape of higher education and with it the hope that a spotlight could shine brightly over the hidden and disgraceful pervasiveness of racism. Now, in the Fall of 2016, the hope for change still persists, but its realization appears far more distant. At the end of the Spring semester, the Board of Curators voted to terminate Melissa Click, an Assistant Professor, for her attempt to protect students from the media. The day after, at the Faculty Council meeting Interim Chancellor Hank Foley defended the decision of the Curators in front of the Council. At the same meeting, committee reported on policies that would allow university officials to revoke sports scholarships for any student who refuses to practice or play which would discourage athletes from protesting in the future. This Fall administration circulated a proposed set of policies regarding the use of space on the University of Missouri that ensures that a student group will never again be able to setup camp on university grounds. While much has changed since the resignation of Tim Wolfe, so much still remains the same.

I write about these events partly because I witnessed much of them, but mostly because they offer a sobering message about hope and persistence. I think Ferguson sparked outrage, spread awareness, and inspired people like Jonathan Butler into action. The Black Lives Matter movement has kept the dialogue real and alive. The media’s attention to the deaths of Black men and women at the hands of police are constant reminders of the struggles ahead. But now the topic of race and racism has become widespread, occurring on news channels, talk shows, award shows, in the lyrics of popular songs, at NFL football games, and throughout the presidential

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campaign. Racism is no longer as easy to hide or to ignore. I feel a sense of hope in this realization; yet, at the same time, I recognize the long struggle ahead towards social justice. We must be persistent in our endeavors. We must keep the Ferguson movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Anti-racism movement real and alive.

This special issue of *Critical Education*, entitled “The Legacy of Ferguson: A Referendum on Citizenship Denied,” presents papers about Ferguson, several of which were presented as part of a panel on Ferguson held at the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) conference of the National Council for the Social Studies in 2015. However, some of these articles were added by colleagues to address issues in Baltimore and to reflect back on Ferguson two years later.

The first set of papers address Ferguson directly. Alex Cuenca in his “Ferguson and the Violence of Indifference” encourages educators to interrogate their own indifference to issues of race and racism occurring in their schools and communities. Mariah Bender, a student leader in the Occupy Saint Louis University (SLU) movement, offers a personal account of Ferguson and student protests at SLU. Finally, Lauren Arend writes a retrospective of Ferguson two years later.

The second set of papers address the larger implications of Ferguson. In “My Reasonable Response: Activating Research, *Mesearch*, and *We*search to Build Systems of Healing,” Ty-Ron Douglas explores the intersections of one’s personal biography, community advocacy, and research as he considers the question of healing as related to the events at Baltimore. LaGarrett King deconstructs the way in which the media contributes to racism by its portrayals of Black men. Finally, Terrie Epstein writes about the steps to achieve justice and equity in the aftermath of Ferguson.

Alex Cuenca and I worked as co-editors on this project. As we arranged these pieces, we felt struck with an overwhelming sense of purpose. We have to keep this conversation real and alive. So with hope in our hearts and hands ready to toil with patience and persistence, we invite you to join the struggle, because Black Lives Matter.

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