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## *Ferguson and the Violence of Indifference in Our Classrooms*

Alexander Cuenca  
*Saint Louis University*

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

### **Abstract**

*Robert F. Kennedy, the day after the death of Martin Luther King challenged our country to rid ourselves of the violence of indifference, which slowly corrodes humanity and poisons the relationships between men and women because of a difference in the color of their skin. The violence of indifference is what Ferguson is asking us to indict, and I draw on the voices, protests, and events in Ferguson to challenge educators to interrogate their own indifference and those of their students.*



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The death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 punctured the stretches of silence in our country around the realities of racism. After his body lied lifeless on West Canfield Drive for four hours, the demands of accountability for his death outside of the Ferguson police department turned into prolonged days and nights of protests. As a nation, we witnessed the raw emotions of a community in Ferguson flicker across our screens. The images being exported from Ferguson were jarring because they were reminiscent of apartheid South Africa and not of a placid suburban American city. Moreover, those in the media were often transfixed on the signifiers of the demonstrations (shouting, chanting, destruction, and obstruction) while missing what was being signified: a community in search of justice, not just for Michael's death, but for the long train of abuses it had endured. Consequently, the public was given an alibi. Ferguson was an extraordinary event.

Let me be clear—Ferguson is not an extraordinary event. Tulsa 1921. Watts 1965. Newark 1967. Los Angeles 1992. Cincinnati 2001. In fact, it is the very ordinary nature of the vulnerability of Black bodies in the United States today that incited the movement born in Ferguson. Each of these episodes and the many more that I missed on that list are not occasional eruptions of racial tension. They are linked together by our repeated inability in the country to ask the difficult questions of our society and of ourselves. Our history in the United States evinces an enduring avoidance of conversations about race and the numerous systems erected on the foundations of colorblindness, microaggressions, bias, and prejudice.

For classroom educators, the question before us is what do we do now? Certainly, Ferguson has brought up issues worthy of discussion in the classroom such as the proper relationship between citizens and police, the role of civil disobedience in the search for justice, the role of zoning laws in quarantining the opportunities of Black communities, and the ways in which traditional and social media construct a narrative of events for historical memory. While these topics are important, if Ferguson is utilized as an opportunity for a current events lesson or simply appears as a fragmented part of our curriculum, then we've missed the point. We must lean in and listen closely to our fellow citizens who have been repeating the refrains: "black lives matter," "no justice no peace," and "which side are you on?" (Samuels, 2014) We are being implored as educators to not just teach *about* Ferguson, but to teach *for* Ferguson.

What Ferguson exposed for all to see was the intricacy of a system that tilts opportunity away from Black residents. Zoning laws that limited the existence of low-income housing (Gordon, 2009), courts that pushed the poor further into poverty (Balko, 2014) and a contentious relationship between the police force and the people they were meant to serve (Department of Justice, 2015). Ferguson exposed how prejudice plus power, the very definition of racism (Tatum, 2003) operates within the boundaries of a community.

This is what Ferguson is asking us to indict. But, we cannot give in to the tendency to ignore these realities because they do not affect us or because we are discomforted by what this awareness raises. If so, we would be allowing Ferguson to fade into the history books.

We must invert our perspective and force ourselves to look inward for contingencies and complicity. We must become more aware of our role in what Robert F. Kennedy termed, the "violence of indifference." The day after the death of Martin Luther King, Kennedy challenged our country to confront something bigger than the violence of gunshots. He asked us to rid ourselves of a form of violence that is much slower, but just as deadly, that of indifference, of inaction, and of slow decay. "This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relationships

between men and women because of a difference in the color of their skin. The violence of indifference is the slow destruction of a child by hunger, of schools without books, and homes without heat in the winter (Kennedy, 1968). It is the violence of indifference that gives us our alibi to turn away from Ferguson without properly interrogating it in our classrooms. Indifference is what allows us to dismiss the movement before leaning in and listening to the why of the movement.

But it is this violence of indifference that Ferguson should bring into focus. As educators, we operate within a present paradigm that fails to interrogate indifference because the ethos of schooling is rooted in economic pursuits. The story goes something like this...our job as teachers is simple, provide students with access to economic opportunity. As long as we make sure that we give our students the most marketable skills in math, literacy, science, and even some social studies so that they know how to vote, our job ends there. We teach curriculum, give exams, and discipline students with the expectation that becoming a productive member of society equates to being a productive *economic* member of society. This thought is most succinctly expressed in a phrase we've all heard a thousand times: college and career readiness. And just in case you haven't noticed, college readiness is also career readiness.

And this is exactly what school did for Michael Brown. By all accounts, he was college ready, yet this education was insufficient. College and career ready lessons were of little use when Michael raised his hands and cried don't shoot. For Michael and the thousands of others children caught in the violence of indifference that we've perpetuated in this country, education that prepares you for a job is not enough, because the odds are still tilted against you. The economic, political, and social systems that we believe are based on merit are just human constructs fraught with the same prejudices, biases, and contradictions found in our society. Yet, our classrooms are standardized, tested, and deprofessionalized in the hopes that our schools can serve as escape hatches for the poor. Certainly education for mobility matters, but when economic adequacy is the rationale for schooling we are forced to target all of our curricular and instructional efforts and resources toward this goal. In doing so, we accept the narrative that education is the escape from poverty, which absolves our society from the responsibility of stopping inequity. This rationale also provides us with a dangerous alibi that allows us to forfeit discussions of public justice: We don't have time, it's not in the standards, it's not on the test, it's not what I'm going to be evaluated on, it's not what my kids need for the real world. Without thinking about it, we lock ourselves into a self-defeating cycle. We focus our energies on efforts that exclude interrogating inequity, and then our schools are blamed for their inadequacy in resolving inequity.

What Ferguson asks is that we interrupt this cycle. As educators, we must work together to alter our rationales so that our classrooms are less about individualism and more about mutuality, since it is this individualism that breeds indifference. Ferguson demands that we as educators do more than just talk about an achievement gap, but instead we educate ourselves, our students and our circles of influence about the numerous other gaps that exist in America. We must use our classrooms as vehicles to interrogate and dismantle these inequities.

We must ask why in St. Louis, a child born in the Clayton in zip code of 63105 lives to be 85, while one zip code digit away in North St. Louis, that child only lives to be 67? Why are healthy food options for Black communities more difficult to attain than for Whites? How do we allow young Black children to be twice as likely to be uninsured than their White classmates? Why do 27% of Black women in St. Louis receive inadequate care while only 5% of White

women report the same issue?<sup>1</sup> In our classrooms, these realities shouldn't just be fodder for a lesson, but taken to heart as the core of our work. We know that life expectancy, health, and family determine as much about the outcome of an exam as the depth of our knowledge. Yet, our curriculum is often indifferent in its silence.

We must not be ensnared into the belief that these gaps are not our problem. It is important to note that these gaps are not *merited*, but *inherited* from a history of oppression and the slow and steady violence of indifference. Redlining, covenant restrictions, discriminatory banking practices, sundown towns, and contemporary zoning laws (just to name a few) have all suppressed the growth of social and economic capital within many Black communities. Michael Brown inherited this history. Segments of the community in Ferguson live this history, and many of the students we see everyday in our classrooms are writing this history. Thus, Ferguson demands that we do more, that we recast education beyond economic opportunism and toward a search for justice.

How we teach *for* Ferguson is by thinking about how our work as educators serve just ends. Ferguson demands that we look inward and we ask ourselves questions, such as: What practices are we perpetuating? Where is our curriculum being indifferent? What are we refusing to challenge? We must realize that we are Ferguson too. In our classrooms, we must take a closer look at the spaces we inhabit: Where are the physical divisions in our communities? What are our housing patterns? What separates us? What unites us? Who is left out of that union? And what is our like-mindedness keeping us from minding? We must also not just look at ourselves now, but at the legacy cast by our history. What policies have we built? Who do they preference? And what can we change?

As Cornel West (1994) wrote in *Race Matters*, “A candid examination of race takes us to the core of American democracy. And the degree to which race matters in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens is a crucial measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America” (pp. 154-155). Ferguson must matter in our classrooms, because we are bound to Ferguson by the social contract inherent in our democracy. What is unjust in Ferguson, must also be indicted as unjust in our classrooms. Our classrooms must stay engaged and grapple with the injustice in our society.

The events of Ferguson sparked a movement. Protests and talk of racial inequity has broken into spaces traditionally protected from such inconvenient and uncomfortable conversations about race, such as the unfurling banners at Cardinals and Rams games, the protests in suburban grocery stores, and the occupation of a mostly White university campus, my campus at Saint Louis University. My hope is that you will let this movement break into the protected space of your curriculum. My hope is that you will find ways to address the demands of the movement by not settling for the peace of the status quo and repurpose your curriculum in the name of justice, that you will tackle indifference explicitly and implicitly in your classrooms so that Black lives matter in what we teach and how we teach. My hope is that we ask ourselves, , what side of justice am I on?

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics come from the *For the Sake of All* Report, a multi-disciplinary project between Washington University in St. Louis and St. Louis University on the health and well-being of African-Americans in St. Louis.

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## Author

Alexander Cuenca is an assistant professor of Social Studies Education at Saint Louis University.

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