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## *Same As It Ever Was Ferguson, Two Years Later*

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

### **Abstract**

*In this essay, I take a look at Ferguson two years after the death of Mike Brown and question what if anything has changed? I challenge educators to resist the temptation to reduce the complexity of the social fabric to an individual or to a specific town. It is our responsibility to guide our students to understand that racialized oppression is everywhere, and that to study Ferguson is to study any town, every town.*



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“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”  
-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

“[He] will be, was, is right now shot down, happening yesterday, happened tomorrow, will  
happen now”  
-Aracelis Girmay, *Night, for Henry Dumas*

“Fuck your state of emergency. It’s been a state of emergency. Where the fuck have you been?”  
-T-Dubb-O, *State of Emergency*

In August, 2015, just one year after Ferguson, the police deployed tear gas in a neighborhood in North St. Louis City, a few miles from my home. The gas was deployed while children were outside on the streets and near enough to residences for the gas to seep into homes. Another black male was shot and killed by police, and the punishment for the neighborhood enduring this violence, constant violence, was militaristic aggression. On August 19th, 2015, ten days after the so-called anniversary of “Ferguson,” there is nothing to look back on. Now, in August 2016, two years after Ferguson, everything is the same as it ever was.

Last year, media obsession with the commemoration of a year up to August 9, 2015 suggested that we were looking back at something that happened in a finite space and time, suspended in a particular historical moment, for us to examine and learn from. To “look back” at Ferguson suggests we have transcended what happened then, in that time, in that place. It is difficult in my mind to even contain “Ferguson” to an event or a movement, much less a day or a week. The cry that “Ferguson is Everywhere” is not speaking solely to geography. It speaks to the ubiquity of experiences of inequity that permeate all of our interactions, everywhere. Ferguson Is Everywhere, all the time.

“Ferguson” was a manifestation of a host of experiences that have been happening and will continue to happen. Black children were subjected to police hostility and violence long before August 2014. Black communities lacked trust in their civil servants long before August 2014. Municipalities had made up for budgetary shortfalls by taxing and fining poor, working communities long before August 2014. Black people were disproportionately incarcerated as a result of aggressive and racist policing practices long before August 2014. Black activists were aggressively targeted and monitored long before August 2014. Black children attended underfunded schools long before August 2014. Black citizens experienced poverty and violence long before August 2014. Racism permeated St. Louis policies and relationships long, long before. Ferguson has been everywhere.

Last year, in August 2015 the commemoration of Michael Brown’s death was not a moment of community memorial and connection. The commemoration was for the media and its consumers, covering their own coverage from a historical standpoint—as if to say, look what we covered last year and look how we’re covering last year’s coverage and look at the new things we’ve added to that historical coverage. The implicit message of “one year after” discussions was that we gave permission for the conversation to stray from the topic of Ferguson. The discourse a year later catered to those who have “Ferguson fatigue,” want to talk about something else, want to shift the focus once the anniversary is over. Even the questionable state

of emergency initiated by St. Louis County Executive Steve Senger in reaction to activists shutting down Interstate 70 was met with mild indifference. Now in August 2016, the second anniversary passed along somewhat unnoticed and nearly forgotten.

Michael Brown lived and died in a way that fit a far too typical narrative for Black people in America. In August 2015, the local activist voices were in fact not responding to a remembrance of August 2014, but to the events of August 2015. The month we were supposedly honoring the anniversary of Ferguson, warrants were served en masse for acts of civil disobedience one year old, high profile Black activists were arrested and served excessive and serious charges, dozens of protesters and legal observers were arrested without charge and held for hours, and a State of Emergency, reserved for natural disasters or foreign combatants, was initiated in response to protest. The trending hashtag #WhichEmergency after Stenger initiated a “state of emergency,” detailed in painful tweet after painful tweet the daily emergencies of being Black in America, and exposed the fallacy of looking at Ferguson as a moment. The release of St. Louis rapper T-Dubb-O searing diss track “State of Emergency” in the midst of the August 2015 state of emergency articulated the hollowness of any claims of progress. In August 2016, the status quo of indifference and aggression towards Black communities in the St. Louis metropolitan region persists.

Perhaps the only substantive progress towards dismantling the systems that contribute to the ongoing bodily control of Black bodies was the Missouri Supreme Court’s decision to take control of the Ferguson municipal courts. This was an important political decision that had actual consequences for Black people living in Ferguson. The decision can also be attributed to the very people who have been terrorized for voicing the injustices of the municipal court system. Sustained disruption of the status quo in the St. Louis region, through repeated demonstrations of civil disobedience, led to the Department of Justice investigation and the subsequent move to reform the Ferguson municipal court. Yet, the same voices are being policed and gassed for daring to speak one year later. If there is a historical impetus to look back, it should be to understand this fact. Citizens who expose discrimination and oppression by the state will still be penalized by the state in plain view. Those who wish to discredit or silence dissent will still hold the power over those who exercise their right to dissent.

As educators, we must resist the temptation to reduce the complex social fabric to an event, a person, a town. We must convey to our students that the interactions that people have with each other, have with places, carry the weight of the history of interactions between people like them in places like those that they live. The death of Michael Brown was not an incident in isolation because decades of policies and social structures led to that moment and the events that unfurled after his death. We must guide our students in understanding that to study Ferguson is to study any town, every town. While the nuance of locality can be examined for context, to ignore the common structures that are America presents history as a timeline of discrete incidents with no intersectionality, no relatedness. How can the media report on what happened to Jordan Davis, Darren Wilson, Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, and many others as if each story was only about individual choices and isolated circumstances? Our students need to know that Ferguson was always happening and is always happening.

This awakening to the omnipotence and inevitability of oppressive systems and structures will be traumatic for both students and teachers. Educators need to balance the “seeing” with a profound appreciation for the experience of shared interrogation, or what West (2004) calls

“tragicomic hope in America.” This awakes “revels in a dark joy of freely thinking, acting, and loving under severe constraints of unfreedom” (p. 216). To help students find this dark joy, educators must first find it themselves. Too often our schools are places where interrogation, or free thinking, are suppressed, disciplined, discouraged. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) shares West’s affection for the act of questioning itself and articulates the perception that interrogation and the functioning of schools are opposing realities. An educator does not have control over her classroom if she is challenged by students. The material is not being covered if the students and teachers shift focus to questions about events in our community. Coates remembers that he learned to read and write to interrogate in spite of school. This is the narrative that can be shifted by educators who recognize that social movements and moments are never discrete, never finished, never able to be fully relegated to a date last year to look back at. Coates offers words that paint this complexity and ambiguity as a worthwhile endeavor, not a reason to despair:

Perhaps our own triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about his world is meant to be. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope. (p. 71).

In August 2016, two years after Michael Brown was killed nothing has changed. People in North St. Louis were struggling before, and they are struggling now. The desire to control Black bodies and silence questions of racial injustice is the same, perhaps stronger. There may have been a shift; however, two years after “Ferguson,” in the intensity and prevalence of those willing and able to interrogate. Teachers, students, citizens have begun, in small pockets, to see interrogation as the goal itself, and hopefully, have found a sense of tragic/comic hope in the process.

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