

Answering Ferguson in the Social Studies Classroom: A Perspective from St. Louis

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A demonstration in Orlando, FL on August 16th, 2014, affirming that the issues raised by events in Ferguson affect all of us. (AP photo/Alex Menendez)

Last year, social studies professionals descended into St. Louis for the NCSS annual conference. The sights and sounds of the city provided a backdrop for the emergence of new practices and perspectives. Once again many of us turn our attention toward St. Louis; however this time, the lessons are different.

On August 9th, Michael Brown, a college-bound black male, was fatally wounded by a white police officer in the streets of the St. Louis county municipality of Ferguson. The following day, protests began to form outside of the Ferguson Police Department demanding answers. With very limited information given to the community on the status of the investigation, the protests eventually sparked several nights of clashes between citizens and police. While the civil unrest in Ferguson is a direct response to the death of Michael Brown, the context for this uprising can be found in the racial history of the St. Louis metropolitan area.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the city of St. Louis was a destination for many southern blacks searching for factory jobs in the north. In the following years, the steady growth of the city's black population was met with white flight and discriminatory practices such as housing covenants of the kind presented below that restricted the use and sale of property to black families. Suburbs located just outside of the city limits such as Ferguson thrived as proximal enclaves that used the same restrictive racially discriminatory housing practices. Although the Supreme Court in *Shelley v. Kramer*, a 1948 case involving the sale of a St. Louis home with a racial housing covenant, declared the practice unconstitutional, other de jure practices in the region continued to persist. For example, until 1968, the streets in Ferguson were barricaded or would dead end before reaching neighboring Kinloch, the oldest black town in Missouri that boasted at the time, one third of the area's black population.¹

And, WHEREAS, it is to the mutual benefit and advantage of all of the parties of the First Part to preserve the character of said neighborhood as a desirable place of residence for persons of the Caucasian Race and to maintain the values of their respective properties, and to that end they desire to restrict the use and disposition of their several said parcels of land for the benefit of all parties of the First Part, their heirs, successors and assigns, in the manner hereinafter set forth; and,

WHEREAS, the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange, a corporation, of which said Trustees are respectively the President, Treasurer, and Secretary, is organized to promote the interests of the property owners of the City of St. Louis, and is, therefore, in thorough sympathy with said purpose, and desires to cooperate in the establishment of said restrictions; and,

WHEREAS, it is the desire and intention of the parties of the First and Second Parts to also provide for the enforcement of said restrictions;

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the premises and of the sum of One Dollar (\$1.00) on parties of the First Part in hand paid by the parties of the Second Part, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, the parties of the First Part do covenant and agree to and with each other, for themselves, their heirs, successors and assigns, and for and upon behalf of all persons who may hereafter derive title to or otherwise hold through them, their heirs, or assigns, any of the parcels of land hereinabove described and with parties of the Second Part and their successors in trust as follows, to-wit:

Each of the parties of the First Part covenants and agrees and does hereby create, establish and attach to his, her or its lands hereinabove described, or his, her or its interest therein, the following restrictions upon the use, occupation and enjoyment, sale, alienation (voluntary or by operation of law), encumbrance and descent of said lands, or any part thereof, or any interest therein, and does agree that neither he, she or it, or his, her or its heirs, successors or assigns, owner or owners, grantee or grantees, or their heirs, successors or assigns, or any of them shall or will at any time within the period hereinafter mentioned:

First: Erect, maintain, operate or permit to be erected, maintained or operated any slaughter house, junk shop, or rag picking establishment on any of the parcels of land belonging to parties of the First Part and hereinabove described.

Second: Sell, convey, lease or rent to a negro or negroes, or deliver possession to or permit to be occupied by a negro or negroes (no matter how the right to occupancy or title shall be attempted to be acquired) any of the said parcels of land belonging to parties of the First Part and hereinabove described, or any part thereof or any interest therein.

The foregoing restrictions and each of them shall remain and be in force and effect for a period of twenty (20) years from the date hereof, unless sooner terminated by writing executed and acknowledged by the owners in fee of at least seventy-five (75) per cent of the total number of feet frontage upon the parcels of land of parties of the First Part, hereinabove described and duly recorded.

St. Louis Real Estate Exchange Covenant, 1944, http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu/_includes/documents/rp_doc3.pdf

In the decades since then, municipalities like Ferguson that are proximal to the city, have experienced the same flight they once accommodated (see <http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu/map/>). As a result, suburbs like Ferguson have undergone a significant demographic shift. While the population of Ferguson has hovered around 22,000 since 1990, the percentage of white and black residents has dramatically reversed from 25% black in 1990 to 67.4% in 2010. Despite this new demographic reality, the governance and power structures in Ferguson remain mostly white. The mayor, police force, school board, and city council in Ferguson are not demographic proxies for the majority of the citizens they serve.

Much of this representative asymmetry is influenced by low voter turnout. In the most recent municipal election, for example, whites in Ferguson were three times more likely to vote than blacks.² However, a simple tally serves as an im-

proper depiction of the expression of citizenship in Ferguson. Much of the political disillusionment within the black community in Ferguson is borne from the legacy of racism that limited and continues to limit social and economic progress. An 80% poverty rate among blacks in Ferguson reflects in part the existence of low-income housing, which most St. Louis municipalities prohibit through zoning laws. The poor are disproportionately black, so the effect is comparable to being quarantined into certain communities and complexes. This kind of rental residential pattern in Ferguson does not cultivate deep political roots in the community, which helps explain some of the low voting patterns.

The lack of black representation in Ferguson can also be traced to the private money political system that drives U.S. elections. Financial resources often dictate the entry and success of candidates for municipal office. However, as Colgate

economics professor Jay Mandle explained, the low-income black community of Ferguson illustrates why an electoral process based on private funding can deprive the disproportionately poor of democratic representation:

Ferguson illustrates the way that a political system dependent on private financing marginalizes the poor. Low-income people cannot provide the resources necessary for electoral success. As a result they are deprived of influence. This then means that they come up short in the resources and policies that follow from the political-decision making. Political alienation grows, reinforcing their political marginalization.³

Beyond the representation issue, the legacy of racism is further entrenched in the strained relationship that black residents of Ferguson have with the almost all white police force. As has been widely reported⁴, Ferguson police stop and detain blacks at a higher rate, despite the fact that searches of black residents result in the discovery of contraband 21.7 percent of the time while searches of white residents results in the discovery of contraband 34 percent of the time. A report by the ArchCity defenders, a non-for-profit group dedicated to defending the poor in St. Louis, captures the devastating effects of these practices on the Ferguson community:

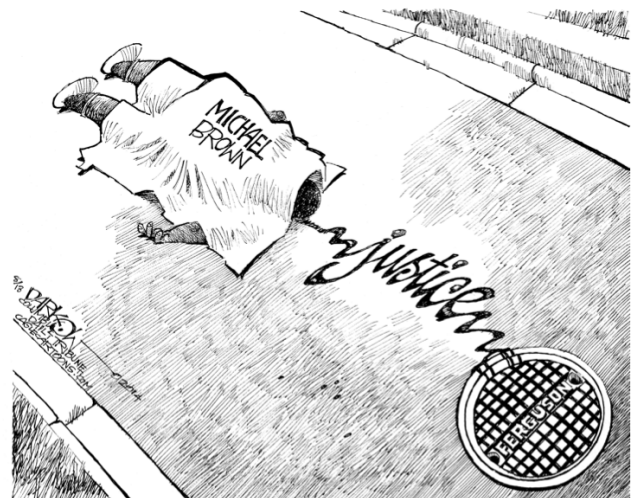
by disproportionately stopping, charging and fining the poor and minorities, by closing the Courts to the public, and by incarcerating people for the failure to pay fines, these policies unintentionally push the poor further into poverty, prevent the homeless from accessing the housing, treatment, and jobs they so desperately need to regain stability in their lives⁵

The realities of a police force issuing over 32,000 arrest warrants in a single year in a community with less than 22,000⁶ residents only reinforces the tautological relationship between a history of racial injustice and black mistrust of government officials. The death of Michael Brown merely lit the tinderbox of historical, political, and economic oppression found in this community.

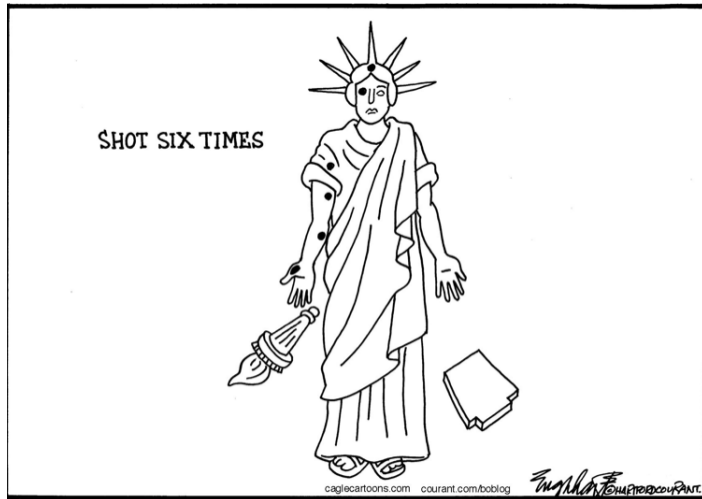
In the United States, there is a reticence among the general population to talk about race and there is also a dearth of resources for discussing racism in the classroom. Yet silence in the spaces where dialogue is needed compounds the prob-

lem. Tyrone Howard points out that social studies educators must realize that “where issues of racism and inequity are concerned, neutrality, silence, and inaction all serve as ringing endorsements for racial oppression and inequity, and reflect a deep-seated hypocrisy in the tenets of what it means to be a good citizen.”⁷

The events in Ferguson should not only compel social studies teachers to discuss the case surrounding the death of Michael Brown, but also serve as an opportunity to critically examine the role of race and racism in our society. Through a current events lens, Ferguson should allow opportunities for students to discuss the content and context of the incident. Along with engaging questions that students bring to the discussion, important questions to consider are: Who was Michael Brown? What was his high school like? Where did he live? What are the conditions of his community? Why do you think the events in Ferguson transpired this way? The critical analysis of political cartoons about Ferguson is another way to engage students in discussions about the issues surrounding this community and our society. Small and large group discussions about the main ideas, symbolism, arguments, and messages in visual social commentaries, such as those below, can evoke emotion, emphasize ideas, and illuminate new perspectives. Although there are many excellent templates for critical cartoon analyses, two of the most popular are the Library of Congress analysis guide (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/activities/political-cartoon/cag.html>) and a guide published by the Citizenship Law Related Education Program for the Schools of Maryland (http://www.clrep.org/uploads/1/7/7/6/17760533/political_cartoons.pdf).



John Darkow, “Arms Up, Don’t Shoot” Licensed from PoliticalCartoons.com



Bob Englehardt, "Autopsy" Licensed from PoliticalCartoons.com

While the discussion of the events in Ferguson is necessary, the enduring issues of racism that surround Ferguson should not be compartmentalized into an isolated current events lesson. In fact, there is very little about the conditions in Ferguson that are current. What is needed the most in the wake of Ferguson is an examination of the racialized social, economic, political, and ideological conditions that shaped these events. While we can look at the history of Ferguson for clues, social studies educators must pivot conversations about Ferguson to their own communities. A simple current events discussion of a community miles away from our own can easily lead to the "othering" of Ferguson.

Despite the fact that the conditions that fueled Ferguson are pervasive across the United States (e.g. persistent disparities in education, poverty, incarceration, and life expectancy for blacks in the United States), it may be easy for students to see these issues as just a problem for the Ferguson and St. Louis communities. Therefore, social studies teachers must also find ways to use Ferguson as a platform to explore the patterns and practices of racism within their own communities. One way to more closely examine racial dynamics is through explorations of our own schools. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the 1996 NCSS Bulletin *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues* urged social studies educators to ask students to study race and racism in their schools and pursue questions such as:

- How many students of various races and ethnicities attend a particular school?
- How many students of color are enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes and in vocation and gener-

al classes?

- How many students of color are in special education classes?
- What is the dropout rate for students of color?
- What is the participation of students of color in extra-curricular activities, such as student government, band, orchestra, or sports?

At the heart of this activity is uncovering the patterns that reproduce inequality within our schools and society. Other community-based inquiry methods such as service-learning projects and Photovoice⁸, which promotes photography in disadvantaged communities, can further the interrogation of the inequities that surround our communities. These kinds of critical examinations resist focusing on Ferguson as simply news, and help us move toward the teachable potential of this moment for our classrooms.

Ferguson should create spaces for critical self-reflection and difficult conversations. This moment should push us to reassess our answers to the question: what are we teaching social studies *for*? The insidiousness of racism and the injustice elucidated in Ferguson should engender reconfigured and/or emboldened purposes for our social studies classrooms. Consequently, what we are teaching *for* should help us prioritize what we are teaching *against*. More explicit attention to issues of racism and injustice will lead to lessons that fill the void of incomplete racialized narratives in our curriculum. The use of familiar methods such as historical thinking, cause-and-effect analyses, and spatial reasoning can help us to intentionally interrogate patterns and practices of injustice. Ferguson also asks us to stop and examine our own racialized understandings and prejudices. Despite the reality that prejudice is "an inescapable consequence of living in a racialized society"⁹ this reality does not exempt us from constantly reflecting and reeducating ourselves. What practices are we perpetuating? What groups are we categorizing? What history are we distorting? What are we refusing to challenge? Finally, Ferguson requires us to engage in difficult discussions with students that we may feel unprepared to have. Undoubtedly, highlighting racial injustice in schools and communities will create uncomfortable moments for teachers and students alike. However, the reality is that racism is uncomfortable, but as the tragic events in Ferguson and elsewhere around the country illustrate, avoidance only perpetuates injustice.

In St. Louis, many of us are exploring ways to begin to heal

the deep wounds of institutional and structural racism that were exposed on the streets of West Florissant Avenue and Canfield Drive. One of the ways our community will move forward is through education, and in particular, social studies education. Our local social studies teachers are now tasked with the responsibility of cultivating future generations of St. Louisians who can work together to untangle the web of institutional racism in our area. The use of familiar methods such as historical thinking, cause and effect analyses, and spatial reasoning can help to interrogate patterns and practices of injustice. However, because of the deep pervasiveness of racial injustice, this work cannot be done in isolation. Our community needs social studies teachers to join us in this reconstructive work by interrogating racism in their own spaces and communities. Through such efforts, we can hopefully replace the silence toward racism with dialogues, deliberations, and discussions expressing new and renewed commitments to equity. 🌍

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Notes

1. John A. Wright. *Kinloch: Missouri's First Black Town*. Chicago: Arcadia, 2000.
2. Brian Schaffner, Wouter Van Erve, and Ray LaRaja. "How Ferguson Exposes the Racial Bias in Local Elections," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/08/15/how-ferguson-exposes-the-racial-bias-in-local-elections/>
3. Jay Mandle. "Ferguson, Missouri," *Huffington Post*, August 25, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-mandle/ferguson-missouri_b_5704393.html
4. German Lopez, "The Cold, Hard Cash at the Heart of Ferguson's Out-of-Control Justice System," *Vox*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.vox.com/2014/8/21/6053281/the-real-cost-of-for-profit-policing-in-ferguson>
5. ArchCity Defenders, *White Paper on Municipal Courts*, 2014, <http://www.archcitydefenders.org/whitepaper.pdf>
6. Missouri Courts, *Warrants Issued and Warrants Outstanding, FY 2013*. <https://www.courts.mo.gov/file.jsp?id=68845>
7. Tyrone Howard. "The Dis(g)race of Social Studies Education: The Need for Racial Dialogue in the Social Studies." In *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on the Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum*, edited by Gloria Ladson-Billings, 27-44. Greenwich: Information Age Press, 2003.
8. Caroline C. Wang, Susan Morel-Samuel, Peter Hutchison, Lee Bell, and Robert M. Pestronk. "Flint Photovoice: Community Building Among Youths, Adults, and Policymakers." *American Journal of Public Health* 94 (2004): 911-913.
9. Beverly Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* New York: Basic Books, 5th ed, 2003.

Postscript:

While the story of Michael Brown and Ferguson is still being written, the story of racism is enduring. Thus, when writing about a complex social issue such as race, there will inevitably be omissions of what else needs to be said. As a teacher educator in St. Louis preparing prospective teachers for the reconstructive work that lies ahead, I hope that you will share with me your perspectives, questions, and ideas for advancing the conversation.

A Partial List of Resources to Discuss Ferguson

Basic Information

Timeline: Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/14/michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-timeline/14051827/>

Front Page Coverage of Ferguson in the St. Louis Post Dispatch
http://www.stltoday.com/gallery/news/multimedia/day-byday-coverage-of-ferguson/collection_5da4cc38-7147-5b2a-84e0-5f99a767bc9f.html#0

Archives of the St. Louis Post Dispatch coverage of Ferguson and Michael Brown
http://www.stltoday.com/news/special-reports/michael-brown/#utm_source=stltoday.com&utm_campaign=hot-topics-2&utm_medium=direct

Archives of the St. Louis American coverage of Ferguson and Michael Brown
http://www.stlamerican.com/remembering_michael_brown/

Out of The Glare, Under the Noise, Other Voices Tell of a Town Called Ferguson
<http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/21/us/ferguson-voices/>

11 Things You Should Know About the Michael Brown Shooting
<http://www.vox.com/cards/mike-brown-protests-ferguson-missouri/mike-brown-ferguson-MO-protests>

Popular Stories and Opinions

In Ferguson, Washington Post Reporter Wesley Lowery Gives Account of His Arrest.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-ferguson-washington-post-reporter-wesley-lowery-gives-account-of-his-arrest/2014/08/13/ofe25coe-2359-11e4-86ca-6f03cbd15c1a_story.html

At Brown's Impoverished High School, Students Try to Make Gains Against Odds.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/at-browns-impoverished-high-school-students-try-to-make-gains-against-odds/2014/08/25/d8a33842-2b98-11e4-994d-202962a9150c_story.html

Wisdom From Ferguson's Kids: 'They Shouldn't Shoot People for Protesting'
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/18/wisdom-ferguson-kids-trust-police>

The Opinion Pages: Frustration in Ferguson
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/18/opinion/charles-m-blow-frustration-in-ferguson.html?_r=0

St. Louis: A City Divided
<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/8/18/st-louis-segregation.html>

Ferguson Fights for Justice Beyond Michael Brown's Death
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/24/ferguson-mike-brown_n_5697855.html

Social Media

Social media has provided real-time coverage and critical analysis of the events in Ferguson. Particular hashtags on social media have been able to archive many of the voices and perspectives from the individuals in the midst of this urban uprising. Social media has also been to provide a forum for educators to help other educators.

Follow Ferguson in Real Time With These 37 Twitter Accounts:
<http://www.vox.com/2014/8/19/6044637/Michael-Brown-Ferguson-Missouri-protests-Twitter-journalists-reporters-protesters>

#Ferguson
 #sschat
 #Ferguson Syllabus

#IfIWasGunnedDown
 #PleaseDontShoot
 #HealSTL

Teaching and Learning Resources: Online

#Ferguson: How We Got Here
 A list of poems, articles, and books created by Left Bank Books, a local St. Louis bookstore. <http://www.left-bank.com/ferguson-how-we-got-here>

#dontshoot, Teaching Tolerance www.tolerance.org/blog/dontshoot

The Pruitt Igoe Myth: An Urban History
 This documentary details the history of a public housing complex in the city St. Louis that eventually collapsed under the weight of the racialized social practices. The entire documentary is available on streaming services such as Netflix. <http://www.pruitt-igoe.com/>

For the Sake of All
 A powerful report that illustrates the consequences of a legacy of racism on the health and well being of African Americans in St. Louis.
www.forthesakeofall.org

Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the American City
 This website features a series of maps that chronicle the residential patterns in St. Louis. <http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu/map/>

Racial Dot Map: One Dot Per Person for the Entire United States
 A snapshot of the racial composition of our communities across the United States created by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Center at the University of Virginia. <http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/Racial-Dot-Map>

Teaching #Ferguson: Current Events in the Classroom
 A crowdsourced document created by the #sschat community of historical and contemporary resources.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kwZl23Q9tgZ23dxSJWS-WpjZh0Z_mzVPtWL8-pWuLt8/edit

Teaching and Learning Resources: Books

Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: The Fate of an American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

Jeffrey Copeland, *Olivia's Story: The Conspiracy of Heroes Behind Shelley v Kraemer*. New York: Paragon House.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (ed.), *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum*. Greenwich: Information Age Press, 2003.

Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Beverly Tatum, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"*. New York: Basic Books, 5th ed, 2003

Mica Pollock, *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005

Terrie Epstein, *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities*. New York: Routledge.

Ronald Evans and David Warren Saxe. *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues*. Bulletin No. 93. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996.