

Black Lives Matter: An Autoethnographic Account of the Ferguson, Missouri, Civil Unrest of 2014

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographic account of the Ferguson Unrest of 2014. The first section is a context-based analysis to understand why Ferguson, Missouri, became a catalyst to ignite national outrage against police brutality. The second central question is to understand what does protest in America look like in the 21st century, particularly through the eyes of the young people who are experiencing these modes of civil resistance for the first time. To get at this question, the researcher draws from many narrative and reflexive accounts of encounters with various interlocutors and locals during two weekends of direct action. As a lens, the author utilizes renowned community organizer Saul Alinsky and neo-Alinsky traditions of issue-generating to analyze the effectiveness of organizers in Missouri. I critique that in an era unlike those in which Alinsky was appropriated [overt/blatant racism and classism] injustices are increasingly more covert, and not the most effective community organizing strategy.

Keywords: *Autoethnography, Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, neo-Alinsky organizing, influence, killable body, Ferguson, MO.*

Introduction

This autoethnographic account of the Ferguson Unrest of 2014 is divided into two sections. The first section is a context-based analysis to understand why Ferguson, Missouri, became a catalyst to ignite national outrage against police brutality in many American cities since the events transpired following the death of unarmed teenager Mike Brown by a white police officer. Central question is to understand what does protest in America look like in the 21st century, particularly through the eyes of the young people who are experiencing these modes of civil resistance for the first time.

The second half of this paper is a deeper analysis of the strategies adopted by organizers and protesters in order to critique what was effective and what recommendations can be made to advance the agenda of the movement. To get at this question the researcher draws from many narrative and reflexive accounts of encounters with various interlocutors and local stakeholders during two weekends of direct action: the first under the national call for solidarity #FergusonOctober, and the second following the decision of the grand jury not to indict police officer Darren Wilson for the officer involved shooting of unarmed Michael Brown.

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The author utilizes renowned community organizer Saul Alinsky and neo-Alinsky traditions of issue generating and teaching power strategies for collective organizing as 1) a lens to analyze the effectiveness of organizers in Missouri; and 2) to highlight the shortfalls and limitations of organizers adopting such neo-Alinsky approaches. I critique that in an era unlike those in which Alinsky was appropriated [overt/blatant racism and classism] injustices are increasingly more covert, hidden, and not the most effective community organizing strategy. In certain cases, these antagonistic approaches to organizing work counterintuitively against the protestors (e.g., discourses of looting, aggressive-irrational behavior, and property damage) which suddenly makes it easier for people to dismiss the goals of the movement. Reflecting on these experiences, I offer a critique of why the Black Lives Matter movement illustrates challenges both domestically and globally of inequality and neo-liberalism which I coin in this essay as the killable body. "Killable Body." a person who may not actively participate in neo-liberalism through formal and legitimate economic venues thus contributing to society—in part because of systematic oppression—who may then participate in or are perceived to partake in informal strategies to survive which allows for race to become easily synonymous and/or misinterpreted for larger global critiques of flawed neo-liberalized society.

Methodology/Autoethnography

The author adopted auto-ethnographic methods and field interviews for this research. Autoethnography is a term used to describe a research approach whereby the author/researcher draws on his or her own experiences written in the form of personal narratives to extend new knowledge¹. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography as an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple levels of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural."^{2&3} As a general rule, autoethnography requires that a researcher study (a) his or her own culture, (b) a culture into which he or she has been adopted and accepted completely, (c) the culture of the self, or (d) the culture of another as it relates to the self of the researcher.^{4&5}

It has been a constant struggle to write this ethnography as I entered Ferguson, Missouri, and the St. Louis area as both a participant and a researcher (participant observer). Moreover, my participant interactions were as an activist, not absolved from tear gas, rubber bullets, tanks, and various other ad hoc police tactics enforced by the local authorities on peaceful and non-peaceful protestors. It was this initial curiosity and inquiry to which I got

¹ Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 21–43.

² Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

³ Tillmann, L. M. (2009). Speaking into silences: Autoethnography, communication, and applied research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37(1), 94-97. doi:10.1080/00909880802592649

⁴ Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2003). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (2nd ed., pp. 199-258). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁵ O'Byrne, P. (2007). The advantages and disadvantages of mixing methods: An analysis of combining traditional and autoethnographic approaches. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1381-1391. doi:10.1177/1049732307308304

involved in the Ferguson uprising. “Although the difficulties of producing good artistic, empathic autoethnography commonly are unrecognized or underestimated among scholars and professionals, a unique strength of this approach is that it blurs boundaries between research and practice. Furthermore, because people occupy multiple roles and interact in diverse social spaces, autoethnography produces valuable knowledge that illuminates unseen aspects of the self and social relationships.”⁶

As a theoretical framework, the paper critically explores intersectionality theory to highlight and critique my unique mobility during the Black Lives Matter movement by deconstructing the subtle prejudices and bias that are underlying and often neglected in non-reflexive modes of scholarly inquiry. “According to an intersectionality perspective, inequities are never the result of single, distinct factors. Rather, they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences.”⁷ Expanding on the ideas of intersectionality theory, I use the term positionality to interrogate the process of knowledge generation throughout this autoethnographic investigation. In understanding my privilege “new embodied knowledge, especially in fieldwork, is often gained through making mistakes, thus unlearning what is taken for granted in the individual’s primary culture”⁸—positionality.

In the case of this research, I was an outsider, an African-American male, which enabled movement across various modes of communication and engagement in unique and meaningful interactions with a variety of actors and interlocutors as a researcher. I was in essence who (the black male) to which the civil uprising was centered on at the superficial level. So my approaches to this research venture had to be modified to accommodate all of these unique idiosyncrasies to understand my positionality and how this impacted the degree to which information was shared with me.

Place is very important to consider here as you will see later that although I was by all technicalities an outsider; I was also inadvertently considered an insider under certain circumstances. On my second trip to the St. Louis area after a day of protesting with a local leader named Bishop, I was invited into his SUV to talk about strategizing for the next day of action. I believe this level of trust was established on our commonalities of identity. Many feminist scholars refer to this as epistemic privilege or “the difference that difference makes.”^{9&10} In other words, our alignment of being black and marginalized fostered a degree of trust between the two parties. Not wanting to miss a word exchanged during this moment, I had my tape recorder recording as a group of Bishop’s supporters were surrounding the car, which was a very intense moment for me, but highlighting the disconnect between I the researcher and the organizers.

In other cases, I was not perceived as a stakeholder. Although I was able to engage in conversations with the locals both black and white, a police/community liaison who was trusted

⁶ Jensen-Hart, Staci and Williams, DJ (2010). *Blending voices: Autoethnography as a vehicle for critical reflection in social work* - Routledge. doi: 10.1080/08841233.2010.515911

⁷ Hankivsky, Olena. (2014). Intersectionality 101. *Cal 64* (1): 01-34.

⁸ Okely, Judith. (2012). “Confronting Positionality.” *Teaching Anthropology* 2.1 36-43. Web.

⁹ Bar-On, Bat Ami. 1993. “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege.” In *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, 83–101. New York: Routledge.

¹⁰ Kitch, S. L. (2002). Claiming success: From adversity to responsibility in women’s studies. *NWSA Journal*, 14(1), 160.

by the church organizers and known for his calming attitude and demeanor—a tactic to build rapport amongst protestors—rejected the opportunity to speak to me when I asked him about “accountability of police and his moral values.” He asked “Where are you from?” I said “Milwaukee.” He then turned his back on me and proceeded to walk towards his men. I interpreted this as the community liaison feeling no need to talk to me because I was neither a member of his constituency, but moreover a member of the outside agitators who were inciting this movement that had befallen on Ferguson.

Part 1: Why Ferguson?

Ferguson is a symbolic microcosm of America. Patricia Valoy credits the rise of urban gentrification leading to a rise of recent racial tension across the United States “Gentrification is new-wave colonialism, and it has economic, societal, and public health repercussions for poor communities of color.”¹¹ Other scholars point to the lack of diversity in America.^{12&13} Many Americans, especially whites; comfort themselves that the U.S. has become a post-racial society. Not Ferguson, which is “67.4 percent black, 29.3 percent white, and only 3.3 percent everything else. The variegated national reaction to the events in the St. Louis suburb also gives lie to the post-racial myth.”¹⁴ Jim Dalrymple critiques the spatial geography and access to resources as creating a powder-keg in Ferguson. “All of these factors—poverty, segregation, lack of civic space—primed Ferguson for unrest.”¹⁵

Whatever the cause; one common thread is that there is still disconnection between the white majority and marginalized minority groups in America. One of the co-participants that accompanied me on my second trip to St. Louis—Christopher, a biracial white and Latino identifying student of psychology and sociology said the following “The events that are going on in Ferguson with the shooting of Mike Brown and the rest of the U.S. is a reflection of the duality and double standards of treatment that exist here in America. White people are oblivious to things like employment disparities, racial profiling, education, and discrimination.” I later asked Christopher what made him go down to Ferguson? This had been his second time back in Ferguson as well; Chris had first gone down in mid-August when the first round of protest spurred. He told me that “being white-passing he grew up thinking that black people were just inherently violent from the things that were portrayed on the news and that a lot of their social dilemmas were a result of this. But, as I got older I saw how the system wasn’t fair and the media was biased in its treatment. So that is why I’m passionate about being a voice and an advocate for minorities.”

#FergusonOctober

I went down to Ferguson and the St. Louis area in Missouri firstly as a participant observer. I was invited to go down to #FergusonOctober with a friend and local activist named

¹¹ Valoy, Patricia (2014). 7 Reasons Why Gentrification Hurts Communities of Color. Everyday Feminism. N.p.

¹² Saunders, Pete (2014). The Death of America’s Suburban Dream. The Guardian, Web.

¹³ Mire, Muna (2014). Youth Are on the Frontlines in Ferguson, and They Refuse to Back Down. The Nation. N.p.

¹⁴ Coy, Peter (2014). Injustice in Ferguson, Long Before Michael Brown. Bloomberg Business Week. Bloomberg.

¹⁵ Dalrymple II, Jim (2014). How Ferguson’s Rotting Suburbia Helped Create A Powder Keg. BuzzFeed. N.p.

Magdalena. Magdalena who was heading down to Ferguson in response to a national call for solidarity and support from the local organizers in the St. Louis area needed some people with which to carpool.

I responded to this invitation out of first initial curiosity about the protest and also because I thought it would be a great opportunity to do research. I was a bit detached and critical as to why people like Magdalena would go down there. What vested interest did she have? Magdalena is a “white-passing” biracial Asian and white identifying twenty-five year old. Magdalena frequently wore a head wrap similar to a hijab [although she does not personally identify with any sectarian religion]. Magdalena had once mentioned of her home being almost robbed by an African-American man some years back. What possibly would bring her to support the plight of what many, including myself at the time, would refer to as thugs?

I wouldn't find out until two months later that Magdalena grew passionate about social justice issue through the apprenticeship of a local community activist and firsthand experiences with the exclusionary and culturally insensitive practices within the non-profit organization where she was employed.

The day of our first scheduled trip to Ferguson, Magdalena picked me up from my apartment at around 8:30 am. It was a brisk fall morning and she had waited five or so minutes as I, this bourgeois graduate student with an over packed suitcase full of clothes, three pair of shoes, laptop, journal, tape recorder, and food, collected myself. I had packed enough luggage for at least a month. Magdalena had informed me that we would be meeting up with two other strangers on the way that she was in talks with on a rideshare website. The first to be picked up was a grungy looking white girl with a teal blue shirt, dirty blond hair, and a pungent smell of fresh coffee grinds named Sky.

Sky had just gotten off work from a local coffee shop when we picked her up with just one knapsack for the weekend. We started to introduce ourselves and Sky mentioned how she arrived in Milwaukee a few months ago from Chicago. Sky had just recently gotten back to the United States from being abroad in China. This prompted a “你说汉语吗 (Do you speak Chinese?).” What followed was twenty minutes of impromptu conversational Chinese. I think it is safe to say that we were probably the only two random individuals in Milwaukee who would do such a thing. We became instant friends.

Like Magdalena, Sky had planned on going down to Ferguson in response to the national call; but she also, in her words, had to get away “from all the racist bullshit that white people would say, like why are you going down there to support those thugs... every five minutes someone would make a post on my Facebook page, some racist article, or say be careful down there its dangerous... I saw this on CNN.” Sky was full of character and very aware of white privilege and anxiety. We had arrived outside the home of Tobias en route to St. Louis. Tobias looked as though he had come from a party the night before. He was Latino, with black hair, and had just gotten back home for the weekend from college in La Crosse, WI. Tobias is a nature loving, tree hugging, human rights, very liberal, music loving, free spirit whose possessions included a hammock, a baggie of weed (unbeknownst to us at first), and a change of clothes. On the other hand, Tobias did not talk in a passive iambic pentameter as one would typecast such a character, but with passion and enthusiasm of his support for the movement. These significant social connections amongst strangers is critical in understanding how I, the

researcher, was able to navigate across different social spaces, proxies, and modes of communication in this research venture.

This car was full of some of the most diverse people I have ever met. Magdalena had a master's degree in communication and is a feminist scholar. Tobias was the youngest of everyone just twenty-two years of age who had a diehard passion against systemic injustices, especially nature. Sky brought an interesting dynamic to the group. Her time abroad in China had taught her a life lesson in diversity and inclusion, to which she became engrossed in reading books covering subject matters from racism, school to prison pipeline, white privilege, and issues of rape. Sky was aware and astute of how to learn from situations in which she was marginalized being a woman and a minority in China to empathize with the struggles of other oppressed groups domestically in the United States.

Then there was me, the only African-American in the car, which was frustrating at first because everyone in the car would guard their words as to not offend (me). There were even some points in the car at which everyone except myself would identify as either white or white-passing based on some premise or another. This was done in my opinion to establish a position that Magdalena, Tobias, and Sky were here to stand in solidarity and support me—the marginalized. This arguably favored how I was able to play devil's advocate in inquiry on certain issues of race without being offensive. For example, a topical discussion of recreational drug use arose towards the end of this six-and-a-half-hour drive:

Darius: I don't agree that drugs like marijuana should be legalized. For me it is the simple fact that unlike alcohol, weed and tobacco is communicable in that I don't want to be bothered by the smell or I have asthma. I don't want to be subjected to the second-hand smoke.

Sky: Wow, I would not expect you to say that. Dude, alcohol kills way more people.

Magdalena: Agree... well I see both sides, but there is some higher level of consciousness you are able to reach while using some drugs.

Tobias: My thing is why the hell legalize it now that these rich white businessmen are profiting from it while for years we have locked up black and brown men for doing the same thing trying to put food on the table...

The conversation shifted towards a discussion on racial injustice and black male overrepresentation in American prisons.

Our first stop after passing the iconic Gateway Arch in St. Louis was at the home of Jazz, who ran a local co-operative that took in protestors who came to support the movement. Jazz was full of character, she talked with a southern twang, wore dreadlocks, free spirited, very hippie-ish. There were chickens roaming free in the front and back yard, a grey blue-eyed pit bull, a cat, and a host of extroverted relatives. Her outgoing daughter Elise was bi-racial, presumably her father was black.

We informed Jazz that we were on our way out to attend the different discussion forums and panels the local organizer of #FergusonOctober had organized throughout the weekend. Jazz and family protested our attendance by saying "Why the hell are y'all going to those boring talks. See that's the opposition trying to co-opt the movement; what we need is boots on the ground." We are okay with doing both I added. Jazz's sister Ramona interjected "Now if y'all really want to get involved y'all be at that Cardinals game tomorrow. That's where I will be. Ain't nobody got time to be going to no fucking parade? See that's where all 'em white

folks gone be at down at that game.” Interestingly, Jazz and her sisters are white, but not identifying with those who benefit from a sort of white privilege. They were themselves marginalized, white trash, the American untouchables; of course they would be part of the resistance.

The next day we attended the “Justice For All” national march in downtown St. Louis. This was the first time in which I witnessed the roles of the different actors during the protest and how far we have changed as a nation when it came to civil resistance and protest. It begs to question if what Ramona had mentioned the day before as the march being just a parade to only be witnessed by the hail of media cameras that made up the audience. The march was at 10:00 am and occasionally you would spot a “green hat” or legal observers who were to act as impartial witnesses to the spectacle. The procession was led by the police who cornered off major intersections; there was no disruption of the status quo. The downtown was empty at this point as most metro-St. Louis residents waited to populate the downtown for the big Cardinals game that was scheduled to take place at 7:00 pm.

A significant uncovering emerging from these diverse conversations and interactions between I and the actors involved in the #Ferguson October protests, was the revelation that those community members and actors engaged in the spectacles of rioting, looting, or occupying space are not irrational actors. They employ significant rational understandings of the complexities and interconnectedness of the problems created by inequality and racism to postulate informed strategies to achieve winnable agendas. Whether or not we agree with the means of social movements and the spectacle of civil resistance unrest, undeniably spectacle helps to change the conversation and raise collective awareness. As stated eloquently by a Ferguson organizer “A problem is not a problem unless you make it” a theme expounded upon in the second half of this article.

Part 2 Case Study: This is What Democracy Looks like...

The following excerpt was journaled while on the ground in Shaw, Missouri, featured in an earlier written account by the author, “Control & Space: Three Short Interpersonal Narratives of Vagrancy” (Carr, 2014)¹⁶:

“We were peaceful protestors, arms raised as we marched down the street of suburban Shaw. Our chanting “Hands up don’t shoot” a reference to the horrific slaying of unarmed Michael Brown, shot to death by a white policeman Darren Wilson just two months earlier. Our destination was the local Quick Trip approximately three miles from where our group of three-hundred originated at a makeshift memorial shrine of another black male youth Vonderitt Myers Jr. who was shot seventeen times by an off-duty police officer. We gathered across the street at a local corner store where Vonderitt spent his last minuets seen by the store surveillance cameras purchasing a few items before he and his friends were intercepted by the officer.

“Hey guys keep it tight... keep it tight! They will arrest you if you don’t, stay with the group so everyone stays together” we were told by one of the Tribe-X leaders. We continued to walk through every obstacle that the streets and sidewalks of the south Missouri suburb could

¹⁶ Carr, Darius (2014) Control & Space: Three Short Interpersonal Narratives of Vagrancy.

throw at us. The overpasses that amplified our voices as we shouted even louder “Indict. Convict. Send that killer cop to jail the whole damn system is guilty as hell.”

The unevenness of the blighted sidewalk would occasionally rift and stumble our chants, but it conditioned our humanity as some of us would stop during the procession to warn our comrades to “watch your step” and it was then passed down the line in repetition until we were all safely across. There was a young African-American male in his teens or early twenty who walked with a club-footed limp in the streets. His unwavering determinism and will power was more galvanizing to action than any of the spoken prose of the local leaders.

Besides the challenges of maneuvering through the streets of Shaw on foot, the blinding lights of the camera lens pierced periodically through the orange hue of the streetlights. It was about 1:30 am when we finally reached the outskirts of The Grove, a gay entertainment and bar district.

We were greeted by the flashing lights of a police checkpoint that was set-up to deter traffic and protesters from joining with the mass. “Sidewalk... Sidewalk... Sidewalk” was the signal to stay on the sidewalk for it was the only place where protesters could legally stand and not be arrested. The police departments of St. Louis have recently adopted many ad hoc police tactics to quell protesters including the illegitimate use of the five second rule, an allusion to a popular myth that if you drop food on the ground and pick it up within five seconds it would be germ free. In this case the physical body of the protester cannot stop moving for longer than five seconds or it would be grounds for arrest by the police.

At this point, we had arrived near the entrance of the neon lit sign of The Grove. Peering around the corner was an armada of white cargo vans with police wearing riot gear. A police tank had also emerged beaming a bright light with two men hanging out the top as it drove towards the Quick Trip. I was taken aback by the sheer sight of the tank and the sheer volume of police force. Suddenly, the streets of Shaw, Missouri, looked all but like those images of Fallujah, Iraq, during U.S. occupation. Ironically, without the familiarity of the police sirens all of us were accustomed to, it was easy for the mind to drift anywhere but in the present tense that what we were witnessing was anything in America.

The leaders took to their bullhorns as we marched steadfast towards the Quick Trip “HEY HEY HO HO THESE KILLER COPS HAVE GOT TO GO HEY HEY HO HO”! The last obstacle as we descended towards this empty, but well lit Quick Trip parking lot was another highway overpass that looked directly down on the gas station and the wall of police that formed in one corner of the station. Many of us rushed to the frontlines of the police formation shouting “No Justice ... No Peace! No Racist... Police”!

Over the police megaphone there was what sounded like a pre-recorded message “This is an unlawful assembly please disperse the area.” “This is an unlawful assembly please disperse the area.” Some of the leaders had jiggled the handle of Quick Trip entrance to see if the door was unlocked. It was indeed locked by fearful store employees as they saw the mass of us walking towards the store. I couldn’t see anyone from the outside, maybe if they were inside they might have hid in the backroom. Or perhaps rumors of police informants or the media that followed sent out the alert of our plans for occupation. Amidst the snafu of it all I questioned myself so what is next? Will the police start shooting tear gas at us or fire rubber bullets at us? I had forgotten to bring my asthma inhaler and I was sure that any vapors would trigger an onset of wheezing that might even be fatal.

The leaders took to their megaphones to organize the bewildered group of protestors who decided to occupy the Quick Trip. There was somewhere between fifty to a hundred brave young people who remained on the frontlines and I was one of them. I had prepared mentally a similar conviction of a soldier summoned to war, always being mindful of the resolve that I was merely a pawn in some political tug of war between personal beliefs of change and the enforcers who were there to uphold the status quo. The rest of the protesters stayed behind on the sidewalk. There was an infinitesimal period of silence. Talil, the leader of the Tribe-X had taken to the loudspeaker. "Alright y'all, here's what we gone do. We are going to exercise our rights humanely as we occupy this Quick Trip. So what I want y'all to do is... We are going to line-up with our back towards the police. We are going to keep it tight. And no matter what they do remember, "United We Stand Divided We Fall."

Talil's voice was hoarse from shouting, he and his comrades had been organizing for sixty-five days at this point, but there was staunchness in his voice that paid testament to his tenacious spirt that was comforting to me. Comforting in that what we were doing despite the police warnings was both necessary and just. The police had no right in this land of free democracy to inhibit us from exercising our constitutional rights to organize and protest in the name of human rights. That we were on the right side of history against the oppressive police state that has continued to brutalize black and brown communities.

As we sat in front of the Quick Trip with our backs toward the police in rows of twos and threes the order was given out by the organizers to link arms and no matter what stay linked! Talil took to the speakerphone again, "So what we are going to do is have a four minute moment of silence, each minute representing the hours that Mike Brown's body laid in the streets uncovered. So stay linked and I will let you know when those four minutes are up." In the distance as we sat there observing the four minutes of silence, the sirens of police reinforcements whistled down the highways. The flashing red and blue lights of the police squad cars crowded my peripheral view as we sat there in silence.

The police battalions began hitting their batons on the ground in military precision. The metronome of the ticking on the ground was a haunting tactic intensified with us having our back towards the ever massing police force. There was also the uncomfortableness of hearing the motioning of the feet of the media personnel, who would walk behind us to take an occasional photo.

At the end of the observation, the leaders called for us to now face toward the police. The number of officers had swelled in sized, encircled us, and now altered our views of the sidewalk. The leaders began to initiate the call and response chanting as the officers advanced closer. "Hands Up" ... "Don't Shoot"... "Hands Up..." "Don't Shoot" "I Said Tell Me What Democracy Looks Like"... "This is What Democracy Looks Like." "It is my duty to fight"... "It is my duty to Win."

It took about five minutes for the police to converge on the right-side of our group. The officers cast their batons in between the interlocking arms of the sitting protestors, but it was not enough to break the line. So they started to mace the group which hit one African-American guy directly in the face. He let out a screeching yell that propelled him up. He was subdued with plastic handcuffs as the police with riot shields bulldozed through the other protestors.

An officer said "this half take them away." The lines were compromised as many in the immediate area disoriented by the mace started to retreat. A flurry of photo journalist rushed

in trying to capture photos of the arrests. This was a particular dangerous moment, because the journalists were now over our heads and it gave the appearance that it was more chaos amongst the sitting protesters. One journalist yelled “He’s got a gun” as his fingers triggered away on the camera’s shutter release. At this point we decided to stand up and regroup.

Adrenaline pumping some of us began to curse at the police officers as they advanced every few seconds ten paces. Those too close were either pushed back with batons, or arrested. The game of cat and mouse continued for about a half-hour until we retreated to the opposite of the street.

The organizers gathered us as we prepared to walk back to the memorial sight. The walk back was a somber retreat. I felt defeated and neglected. Where were the other protesters, some 3,000 who marched earlier that day in the Justice for All Rally? Where were the elders? Many of us have traveled from across the nation; we were young, and fighting for something we believed in. All to be chased off the Quick Trip by the police like some criminal was disparaging—.”

The goal of the demonstration was to show the inhumanity of the opposition—the police. Talil and other Tribe-X leaders had come up to me after we made it back to Vonderitt’s memorial shrine. He asked the group “How did y’all feel about everything that had just happened at the QuickTrip?” I replied I felt angry and defeated. I had never experienced anything like this. Talil shook his head as to agree and said “okay.”

Magdalena interjected “I think it was a win, I learned something new the police tanks, the militarized armored trucks, and sheer size and force of the police.” Talil replied “I’m glad you mentioned that. I wanted y’all to get a chance to experience what we go through on a daily basis. We know that they wasn’t gonna do nothing too crazy, because the national media is out here.” Learning through actions is one of renowned strategist and community organizers Saul Alinsky’s fundamental approaches to community organizing. “Leaders gain skills through the ongoing process of planning, researching, engaging directly with the opposition, and then reflecting on their actions.”

As Talil mentioned, this was a learning exercise so this strategy was a win. After all this experience was transformative for me, I left emboldened and more conscientious about surveillance, police militarization, and illegal ad hoc policing tactics. Moreover, it was a powerful illustration in the supremacy of social media. The Shaw Police Chief tweeted to the world that “protesters were throwing rocks”¹⁷ which eclipsed the peaceful efforts of the organizers. A win for those who were there, but did it move the world, as these symbolic gestures might have done in the past? I spoke with a member of the Palestinian contingent who mentioned that “it is the same rhetoric the Israeli soldiers would use [protestors shooting rocks] to justify shooting at people with real bullets. The difference here (America) is that the police shoot rubber bullets. In Palestine they shoot live rounds to maim protestors by shooting a leg or an arm.”

¹⁷ O’Neil, Tim (2014). Police Chief Says Protesters Arrested after Refusing to Leave St. Louis QuikTrip: News. Stltoday.com. N.p.

Issue Creation or Platform Creation?

Alinsky traditions are not always the most effective and fruitful strategies for organizers, because while galvanizing as such tactics may be they also create great divisions. By focusing leaders on the predations of their collective enemies, the organizer sought to overcome divisions and allow the community to come together as an “us vs. an outside ‘them.’”¹⁸ A week prior to my first arrival to Shaw there was a demonstration outside of the Cardinal’s stadium in which fans shouted racial slurs at demonstrators, threw beer, spit, and shouted I am Darren Wilson. The next time the demonstrators went to the stadium [which is when Magdalena, Sky, Tobias, and I were invited] the Tribe-X organizers invited what was coined as “white allies” to the game who would act as buffers when a fan would try to entice a demonstrator. These white allies were able to work effectively, because now suddenly it wasn’t the white patrons versus the black protestors it was people demonstrating and the individuals who would try to incite an angry response now professed his ignorance to the other patrons, who came to attend the game.

On my second trip down to the St. Louis area I was able to get a chance to march down West Florissant Avenue by the newly built Ferguson Police station. I had even obtained enough trust with local organizers and fellow protestors that I, along with a few others, galvanized a walk up West Florissant Avenue. We managed to go down a few blocks to where there was a bunch of taverns, the National Guard, and white bar patrons who started yelling at the Anonymous group.¹⁹

“Why are you hiding behind the mask? Why don’t you take off your mask and have a real conversation man to man.” I rushed over to the group and got into the face of the bar patron and said “Why don’t you talk to me! I’m not hiding behind a mask.” Somehow in the mix of the confusion and the non-threatening offer of a drink for a conversation, I was meandered into the bar (separated from Magdalena, Sky, and Tobias) and I was suddenly with this mixed group of white men and women identifying as locals.

Bar Patron#1: See here’s a decent young man who can talk to us like real men. You want a drink?

Darius: Sure, who’s paying? (laughing)

Bar Patron#1: What’s your name.... So Darius why in the hell are you all coming in this town trying to kick up mess. This [Ferguson] is one of the most diverse towns I have ever lived in.

Darius: Well first off how many of you in here believe that American media is impartial?

Bar Patrons: [Unanimously] No. No. We aren’t saying that, why are all these people here burning and looting up these businesses. Now I know what happened to that boy is wrong, but this ain’t how you get the message across, all this rioting and looting and parading down the streets hoopin’ and hollerin’.

¹⁸ Schutz, Aaron, and Marie G. Sandy (2011). *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 97.

¹⁹ Waites, Rosie (2011). “V for Vendetta Masks: Who’s behind Them? - BBC News.” BBC News. N.p., n.d.. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-15359735>>.

Darius: Well I just asked you all. How many of you believe that American media is impartial? Everybody said no! So if you know that since this entire unrest that has been going on since August there has been upwards of ten to fifteen thousand people who were peaceful protestors march up and down West Florissant Avenue and let say maybe a handful of them did loot and start rioting. Why in the hell would you come to the conclusion that the protestors are anarchist and trying to burn down the town?

Bar Patron#2: Well, obviously you are educated, your dress nice and everything. If you can make it why can't these other fellas go out and get them a decent job or something?

Darius: Well, who said I'm employed? (Laughs) Well I think you have to look at a little thing called white privilege. And understand that there is a double standard in America when it comes to race. When we march we march for police accountability. Nobody dislikes a good cop; it is those ones who abuse their authority and that are killing us with impunity under the guise of your security is the problem. That is white privilege.

Bar Patron#3: White privilege that's a load of crap. Now, I'm a truck driver and I'm away from my family three hundred hours out of the month. How the hell is that white privilege? That's a load of crap.

Darius: [Pause] What a waste of white skin...

Bar Patrons: [all laugh]

Bar Patron #1&2: Ha you're alright!

I had a two-hour-long talk with this group of twenty-five or so white bar patrons about white privilege, media impartiality, and race in America. My cellphone was dead and I had been separated from my group. I walked all the way down to the Ferguson Police station as a group of national guardsmen in Humvees with blue lights flickering had established post along business that lined the main road.

While we didn't always see eye to eye on the issues discussed, we were at least able to have the conversation. It was a symbolic gesture for me, a black male, to enter into this white space with my guard completely down. I was able to quickly develop rapport with these total strangers. The commensality of sharing a drink at a bar and while at times the conversation was jovial and jabs were being thrown across the table it was a place of healing. By engaging in this impactful conversation and entertaining the curiosity of these white bar patrons we were able to move beyond the blaming that the patrons was consumed with. The authors of *Difficult Conversations* critique "blame inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it."²⁰

As Stevenson Carlebach of the Harvard Negotiation institute proposes in the theory of influence (influence = persuasion/resistance), influence is an equation of persuasiveness divided by the amount of resistance to the speaker.²¹ The key here is the lower the resistance to the concerns of the speaker the more influential the speaker becomes. This might take time, but change happens just by talking about it, we must transform our approaches to lose the antagonistic framework, because it becoming increasingly harder to do so. However, increased

²⁰ Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York, NY: Viking, 1999. Print.

²¹ Carlebach, Stevenson (2013). "The Influence Equation: The Art and Science of Influence." Society of Women Engineers. Cambridge, MA, October 24, 2013 [Http://www.slideshare.net/SWEMarketing/influence-equation](http://www.slideshare.net/SWEMarketing/influence-equation). Web.

public outrage and protestors taking to the streets has shifted the conversation on race in America since 2012. A comparison in white reaction to Ferguson and Trayvon Martin, over the course of a year a 13% drop in the sentiment that race receives more attention than it deserves.²² Thus, there is also a need for the spectacular tactics of civil resistance adopted by organizer and protestors.

Conclusion

In an era unlike those in which Alinsky was appropriated [overt/blatant racism and classism] injustices are increasingly more covert, hidden, and not the most effective community organizing strategy. In certain cases these antagonistic approaches to organizing work counterintuitively against the protestors (e.g., discourses of looting, aggressive-irrational behavior, and property damage) which suddenly makes it easier for people to dismiss the goals of the movement.

Autoethnographic inquiry in the Black Lives Matter movement also allowed for critical self-reflection. One synergy that emerged from this investigation and should be explored for further investigation is this notion of the *Killable Body*. It is key to note that I entered Ferguson, St. Louis, and surrounding communities as first a researcher, not black male. I had no intentions of acting in solidarity for victims of police brutality like my co-participants. During a period of reflection, I interrogated how I initially was critical of Mike Brown characterizing him as a bully and a thug for stealing from a store-owner, which resulted in the incident that led to his death. Even if Mike Brown would have stolen a carton of cigarettes or gotten in a physical altercation with law enforcement did it warrant his ultimate demise? What made Mike Brown a *killable body* for me? A result of this internal reflection was a definition of the “Killable Body,” a person who may not actively participate in neo-liberalism through formal and legitimate economic venues thus contributing to society—in part because of systematic oppression—who may then participate in or is perceived to partake in informal strategies to survive which allows for race to become easily synonymous and/or misinterpreted for larger global critiques of flawed neo-liberalized society. This misrecognition is also symptomatic of the fact that we do not live in a “post-racialized society.”

David Harvey in his famous critique of the city argues “the right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire.”²³ Harvey’s critique of the right to the city offers a unique perspective for understanding how in our construction of the neo-liberal city distinctions are created between those citizens that belong and those who do not. The struggle in refashioning and challenging the shortfalls of equity issues, that neo-liberalism does not address, is at the center of domestic peacebuilding issues in the United State today. Killable bodies are our social constructions of thugs, welfare queens and abusers, homeless, and the jobless. Killable bodies are so, because they are a direct threat to neo-liberal subjectivity, i.e. they are “cheats” and that is what undermines and devalues their humanness. Law enforcement upholds and imposes this collective social identity

²² Pew Research (2014). Stark Racial Divisions in Reactions to Ferguson Police Shooting. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press RSS. N.p.

²³ Harvey, David. (2003). The right to the city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (4): 939-41.

of the neo-liberal city. This places them in direct conflict between the neo-liberal paradigm and those who seek to nuance and refashion the complexity of the inequalities that persist in capitalist society. Neo-liberalism like all other isms doesn't require us to think about it; they become invisible processes that require a constant checking and reflection of self in relation to others. We liberate ourselves when we began to question the truths we construct.

No longer can issues be framed around the premises of race, class, and gender without being nuanced to consider the complexities that exist within each of these classifications. Alinsky approaches are effective at small scale reform and during a particular period in the American strive for social justice; but dated considering how in Ferguson, the participants, not the police were the ones who were scrutinized in the national media for ad hoc and resistant tactics of protest (occupying spaces, boycotting, demonstrating, interrupting traffic, and/or other non-peaceful or disruptive tactics). The continuing Black Lives Matter movements across the nation at the superficial level is about justice for the families of victims of police brutality, however the reality of the movement is about systems of oppression, state sponsored violence of poverty, racial inequality, and a priori of social dilemmas that promotes perceptions of dualism in America between the haves and the have not. Goals that are more complex and abstract than the more pragmatic approaches that measured success in previous Alinsky and neo-Alinsky organizing traditions.

Facing these increasing complexities, how can organizers maneuver forward in this post-civil rights era of misunderstanding and apathy that is true in all factions and intersectionality of the American people? I stress through this fieldwork that platform creation and transformative experiences through greater participation and conversation are a much more effective strategy in this post-civil rights era, where the masses are indoctrinated in egalitarian thinking that we are all afforded the same life chances, no matter race, gender, or creed. It is this adaptation to neo-Alinsky thinking that is paramount to develop awareness, promote understanding and produce meaningful strides to alleviate apathetic sentiments on injustice issues in the status quo.

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