

Ferguson and Racism in the US: The Occupation and Ethnic Cleansing of Africa-America

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There is always context – the larger gestalt of any given time. The sixties are symbolized by Birmingham, Selma, Little Rock. Both racial divides and historic photographs are frozen in black and white of menacing police, German shepherds, water hoses. Whether we add Ferguson, Missouri, to this lexicon of moments defining African-America—and America—will depend largely on whether or not the courage on display in Ferguson is isolated or is conveyed through progressive action to the wider population.

The persistence of the Ferguson uprising has the signature of something larger and deeper, with hundreds of citizens giving new meaning to the universal sign of surrender, by lifting their arms—not in capitulation—but in refusing surrender. Chanting, “Don’t shoot!” protesters invoke the last words of police-murdered-teenager Michael Brown, executed by a white police officer who hit him with at least six shots—Brown’s unarmed hands raised in the air.

This time the images come in hi-definition and real time. Sharp against the police officer’s pant legs straddling it we can see the almost green cast to the German shepherd’s fur and muscled, gloved white arms holding the leash. This time there is little discernible difference between the occupying military equipment we have seen deployed in Middle East occupied war zones and the bullet-proof, cammo vests marked “POLICE” in bold letters on the back, with tanks, personnel carriers and snipers training tripod-steadied, high-powered rifles on the protesters.

The acquittal of George Zimmerman in the 2012 murder of 17 year-old Trayvon Martin is as good a place as any to look for the underpinnings of this uprising. That decision sent an undeniable message that the Supreme Court’s 1857 Dred Scott v. Sandford <https://medium.com/message/ferguson-is-also-a-net-neutrality-issue-6d2f3db51eb0rd> decision remains solidly in place. Chief Justice Roger Taney issued the court’s opinion:

“[African Americans] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it.”

Black people summarized as “it.”

Not surprisingly, after Dred Scott 3,500 African-Americans were lynched from 1882 to 1920. The country transitioned through one historic epoch to another: Reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, the Civil Rights movement and now into our so-called current “post-racial” period where one black man is killed by police or vigilantes every 28 hours. Dred Scott’s core values—the very DNA of racism—remain largely the same. African-Americans have no rights that white men or white women are bound to respect.

Predictable outgrowths of the Brown murder are the arrests and injuries that have occurred as a result of the popular resistance by both the citizens of Missouri and people who have traveled there to stand in solidarity with the embattled community. Mya Aaten-White, for example, a graduate of Howard University, was shot in the head by St. Louis police while she peacefully protested Brown’s murder. The police initially tried to blame that attempted murder on a drive by shooter.

From Palestine to Nigeria the Brown case has captivated the global community for two striking reasons: its exposing escalation in police violence targeting the public; and its revealing African-Americans communities as occupied territories. The illusion that white supremacy is dead and African-Americans integrated into US society is only sustained during periods of détente. Quiet for quiet as the saying goes. During periods of the citizenry rebelling against violence, repression and racism, the state exercises the full range of its fine-adjusting tools, including tanks, armored vehicles and swat/assassination teams armed with precision weaponry.

Such is the history of previous up-risings. In July 1964 Harlem and Rochester, New York, erupted a week apart; Watts went up in 1965; Detroit, in 1967; Washington, DC, in 1968, Los Angeles, in 1992. Patterns emerged where black overseers in the form of police officials and political talking heads get dutifully deployed—in hope of quashing the insurrection while scrambling for the crumbs that may fall from their master’s table once the tear gas dissipates and the carnage is hosed away. The usual suspects converge again in Ferguson.

Brown’s is the latest in an alarming series of murders and public humiliations inflicted over a short period of time on the African American community. On August 5, four days before the police execution of Michael Brown, John Crawford III, a 22 year-old Ohio man was murdered by police while shopping in Walmart. He reportedly picked up a toy rifle within the store while talking on his cell phone. Shoppers in the store were alarmed by seeing Crawford with the toy gun. Police were called and opened fired. John Crawford died at a local hospital, his death ruled a homicide by the coroner’s office. Predictably, Crawford officials refuse to release the surveillance tape to his family.

Eric Garner was murdered during an arrest by New York City police on July 22, 2014. The Staten Island man and father of six was placed in an illegal chokehold which triggered an asthma attack. Video shows Garner struggling to tell the police that he could not breathe. Nevertheless, the police continued to choke him until he was unresponsive. His death has been ruled a homicide by the New York Medical Examiner’s Office. Garner’s alleged “crime” was that he was selling untaxed individual cigarettes. When police approached him he simply asked why he was being harassed. His life was the answer to that reasonable question.

An Arizona professor, Ersula Ore was walking down the street after teaching her English class at Arizona State University. In order to avoid a construction zone, she walked around

the site in the street. A campus police officer stopped her and when she questioned him as to why she was being charged, the officer threw her on the ground and handcuffed her. During an interview on CNN's New Day, Ore was asked about the incident.

"I think I did what I was supposed to do. I was respectful. I asked for clarification. I asked to be treated with respect, and that was it."

Ore faces charges of assaulting a police officer, resisting arrest, failing to provide ID and obstructing a public thoroughfare. Arizona State University has sided with the campus police over its faculty, a situation that might be considered bazaar were it not a case of a black woman being attacked by a white man. Michael Brown was executed for the same "offense" of walking down the street.

Renisha McBride, 19, was murdered on November 2, 2013 outside her hometown of Detroit, Michigan. The brutality of Renisha's murder has shocked even veteran urban dwellers. The accused murderer, Theodore Wafer, 54, literally shot Renisha's head off with a 12-gauge shotgun through his locked screened door.

As in the Brown case, the police department rushed to criminalize the victim. Instead of investigating what role racism played in this tragedy, media reporting Renisha's death have focused on autopsy results that indicate elevated alcohol levels and a trace of cannabis. McBride's attorney responded: "I don't think the fact that she was intoxicated changes anything," he said. "The bottom line is, he should've called 911 when he heard a disturbance, and we know for a fact that the police would've been there in two minutes. Instead, he did the reverse. He took his shotgun, went on the porch, blew her head off and then called 911."

Wafer was recently convicted of second degree murder and manslaughter—little consolation for her loved ones. Still, one must wonder if a zero-tolerance for racism may have spared Renisha's life had her murderer been ingrained with the belief that in America it is not okay to kill black people.

And finally, the country witnessed another case of gruesome police brutality. In broad daylight a California Highway Patrolman without fear of punishment viciously beat a homeless black woman. Onlookers drove past in cars and pedestrians watched. In this case, the victim was pummeled lying face up on the ground on the side of a Los Angeles freeway. Not surprisingly, the Highway Patrol refused to answer questions about the incident. It was only after a pedestrian's video of the incident went viral that the police parroted a statement about conducting an investigation. The list of crimes against African-Americans goes on and on even as the arsenals arrayed against them escalates beyond control.

Ferguson experienced that arsenal in the aftermath <https://medium.com/message/ferguson-is-also-a-net-neutrality-issue-6d2f3db51eb0> of Brown's summary execution when the police brought SWAT teams and heavy military equipment into that suburban American neighborhood. When the police realized the optics of their operation were all wrong they brought in, predictably, Officer Friendly—Highway Patrol Captain, Ron Johnson—to mollify the mobs. At first, Capt. Johnson found warm receptivity with the residents as he walked along Ferguson's streets with them on Saturday listening to their pain. This came on the heels of calls for restraint from the Brown family, the president, religious and other cultural leaders after the heavy-handed military

deployment failed.

By Sunday night Officer Friendly had abandoned his conciliatory overtures in favor of branding the uprising on Sunday night, “shootings, vandalism and other acts of violence that clearly appear not to have been spontaneous but premeditated criminal acts...The catalyst was not civil disobedience, but pre-planned agitation.”

What a difference a day makes. Gone was Officer Friendly, replaced by statements one would sooner expect from Lester Maddox.

There are in Ferguson’s symbolism motifs from other epic struggles: the lone protester who stopped a file of tanks in Tianamen Square. Tahrir Square’s fruit vendor. The people of Gaza standing defiantly in the rubble from Operation Protective Edge in opposition to vastly superior force, refusing the demand of “quiet for quiet.” Instead, after a week of unrest, the people who have taken to the streets remain determined—even to death—in their pursuit of justice.

Ferguson has already waged a good fight. Without the well-deserved support of a broad left/right coalition that can see this as a moment when the powerless outstrip the powerful, Michael Brown’s name can be added to the anonymous statistics and meaningless deaths of African-Americans at the mercy of a merciless system. Ferguson throws itself against the iron gate of that system. It is up to the rest of us to see that gate gets flown wide open.

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