

On Ferguson to a Former Student

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The following is a response to a former student who lives in St. Louis, Missouri. Like my poem discussing the murder of James Craig Anderson, I had not planned to pen anything about the ongoing Ferguson tragedy. Even though I think that a lot of people have been missing the boat on the essential issues of this tragedy, a few people have accurately identified those issues. So, I was not inclined to “weigh in” or “wade into” these waters, honestly, due to apathy. Yet, like the Anderson tragedy, something happens when one’s student who is still a member of one of my listservs asserts: “I live here and want to know what my teacher thinks. What’s up with the critical thinking on this issue?” I find it very easy to ignore and not reply to most people, but, for some reason, one’s students always elicit a response, usually because they are earnestly grappling with how to use/manifest what they have learned to make the world a better place. And, if that is the ultimate goal of education, to create critical thinkers who become societal philosophers, then I am obligated and inclined to continue to assist them. I guess it’s true—though I have been fighting it—that engaging young people does make it difficult to remain perpetually apathetic. So, below is my response.

Dear Ms. _____:

As always, it is great to hear from you. Like most people I have followed the ordeal in Ferguson and have mixed, swirling ideas and emotions. But, at the core, I think that, while the murder of Mike Brown is just another example of white supremacy, Mr. Brown and the entire Ferguson community are victims and offspring of the inability of African Americans to embrace Black Nationalism and also realize that parenting is the number one issue of the African-American community. That white supremacy exists is not a surprise. That white police officers regularly target and kill African-American males is not a surprise. That African people are still reactionary rather than proactive is sad.

When I first learned of Ferguson, my initial reaction was to wonder why a town that is seventy percent African American is governed by people who do not look like them and who hate them. The local branch of the St. Louis/Ferguson NAACP as well as the Missouri branch of the NAACP and all other organizations that claim to exist to help African people, including the African-American churches, have been negligent in their duties by allowing a town that is seventy percent African American to have elected officials that do not meet their needs and portray open hostility toward them. In a series of four tweets, Derrick Johnson, State President of the Mississippi NAACP, makes it clear that the African-American leadership has failed Ferguson. “Leadership cannot be imported; it must be developed from the people most effected #Ferguson...If Ferguson is 67% BLK and the police department is 92% WHT, we should be organizing for Power instead of organizing for Protest...What is needed in #Ferguson is support in organizing their power and focusing their efforts to impact institutional and systematic change...Why we must vote and elect people accountable to the community? #Ferguson 67% BLK + 92% WHT police department = #MikeBrown murdered.” To Johnson’s point, Civil Rights/SNCC icon Charles E. Cobb, Jr., stated in the *Washington Post.com* that “Black leadership seems to have failed. We see this kind of failure right across black communities in the United States.” And while citing a few areas of successful organizing at the local level, Cobb

is clear that “National black leadership, however, seems lax. Oh, they will show up to protest incidents of murderous horror. With militant speeches they sometimes generate momentary mobilizations. But when it comes to being insistent and consistent with their time, energy, and resources on the day-to-day organizing tasks that could empower black communities, I, for one, do not see them. And nowhere is this truer than in black inner city communities besieged by violence — not white police violence, not Ku Klux Klan violence, but by people of color killing people of color.” Sadly, this inept Negro leadership has continued throughout the Ferguson crisis because they have not once advised or told the people of Ferguson how to obtain the political and economic power they need to protect themselves. Can you name one time that a so-called African-American leader from the St. Louis/Ferguson area has said that the citizens of Ferguson must organize and elect new leadership?

This lack of leadership and organization also relates to the economic conditions of Ferguson’s African-American community. The reason that most of the businesses in African-American communities are not owned by African Americans is because African Americans have allowed themselves to become a lazy, cowardly, and dependent people. Why do African people continue to frequent businesses that cheat and mistreat them? Why hasn’t their so-called leadership embraced and promoted Black Nationalism as a way for African people to obtain economic control of their lives? In the same way that most African-American leadership is politically inept, it is also economically inept, and this flaw has become glaringly clear in Ferguson as it is in Jackson, Mississippi, and elsewhere. With a high estimate, only about thirty percent of African Americans are employed by African Americans, which means that seventy percent of African Americans are employed by non-African Americans. Therefore, African Americans are perpetually dependent on others to feed them, which makes them perpetually dependent on others to educate them because one’s quality of education is directly related to one’s ability to fund that education. The inability of African-American leadership to develop black-owned businesses that invest in the African-American community is another major element that leads to the inability of the people to protect themselves and their children.

Furthermore, looting stores is merely an example of the immature and childish state of African Americans, showing that we are not a mass of critical thinkers. African Americans must learn that having a “temper tantrum” is not a viable solution to anything, but we will never learn this if we continue failing to demand that our children become critical thinkers, which means embracing real educational and parenting reform in our communities. To be clear, my issue is not with the “anger” of the Ferguson community, but at some point the emotional reaction must be supplanted by an intellectual/critical reaction. Rather than loot the stores, that community should be identifying ways to purchase/own those stores and evict the current economic bloodsuckers from their neighborhoods. But, again, there is obviously no type of grassroots organizing and activism occurring in Ferguson, or most anywhere else, so African people continue to react irrationally rather than critically. And, to be coldly honest, there is nothing revolutionary about looting stores. I would have more respect if the “angry” community decided to gain retribution by declaring war on the police or the elected officials, but that ain’t going to happen because we are, again, lazy, cowardly, and dependent. Just wait; in a few weeks the same group of looters will be asking the white folks for five dollars to help repair their communities rather than using this as an opportunity to engage Black Nationalism.

Finally, while I think that the punishment must fit the crime, I was also raised to understand that whenever I commit evil I am inviting evil to my doorstep. If they prove that Mr. Brown was in the act of committing a crime, that does not justify shooting an unarmed person. America knows that Mr. Brown was killed because he was black. In a recent study by the Black Youth Project, seventy-seven percent of whites state that they trust the police. And, seventy-three percent of whites state that they “feel like a full and equal citizen with all the rights and protections that other citizens have.” However, only forty-one percent of whites feel “that the American legal system treats all people fairly”. Despite the spin of the Fox News pundits, even white people know that Mr. Brown’s death was racially motivated. How many white criminals are killed while committing crimes? How many white people are killed because of the “suspicion” of illegal activity? I don’t remember any white person being harmed or killed during the Occupy Movement. So, the data tells us that African Americans are three-times as likely to be injured or killed when engaging the police. As such, African people must be diligent in teaching our children that evil only begets evil. To be honest, I don’t try to avoid evil because of the moral/spiritual consequences; I try to avoid committing evil because of the physical/legal consequences. We must also remember that non-violent protest was not embraced by most Civil Rights organizations because the majority of the members were, themselves, non-violent. Non-violent protest was embraced because it was an effective strategy that allowed the African-American community to show/highlight/juxtapose the evil of white law and behavior, causing the world to become horrified by the evil of American racism. Today, the vast majority of white people still suffer from white supremacy, which remains the guiding ideology for police tactics/strategy. Yet, returning to my earlier point, if African Americans embrace Black Nationalism, then they could control the type of law enforcement that patrols their community. On the other hand, if African Americans are not going to embrace Black Nationalism, then they should at least do a better job teaching their children how to avoid and then navigate/survive police engagement. Of course, we see, once again, that it is almost impossible for African Americans to survive police engagement as the police and the socio-political and economic institutions are currently constituted. To this end, as unfair as it sounds, we still must do a better job teaching African children what Richard Wright shows in *Lawd Today!* To be born black and poor is a challenge, but to be born black, poor, and make bad decisions makes a challenge a tragedy. Hopefully, all of the facts will allow us to know if Mr. Brown could have done anything to aid in his own situation. This will not be to lessen or to justify the racism/evil of the officer but to teach our children that vandals, be they police vandals or corporate vandals, must be avoided at all costs.

Again, it is great to hear from you. Interestingly, I had not attempted to organize and clarify my ideas and emotions regarding the murder of Mike Brown because it is all just status quo to me: the constant explosion caused when inept Negro leadership meets or intersects with white supremacy. Yet, one thing is true. It is the mass (rank and file) of African people who suffer the most from this constant explosion caused by inept Negro leadership and white vandals. Take care.