An Experiential Response to Ferguson

Domonic Rollins
University of Maryland-College Park

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa/vol2/iss3/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.
It’s Thursday, December 4, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I like getting a jump on the day, starting fresh and really considering what the day may have in store for me. Though, today is slightly different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man. Today is also different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man. Today is also different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man.

Others before me have said this, and it will continue to be said. Yet, there is something so jarring when you engage this idea – that I am Nigger too – for yourself. You consider how far White people – American society – have come, and see that there is no distance between slavery, Jim Crow, and today. Shaken up, you learn, admit, and am reminded this is NOT true. No Black, Brown, or Of Color body is protected, insulated, shielded, or safe in our racist society.

I am motivated to achieve, gain, garner, and accrue to distance myself from my racialized Black, Brown, and Of Color family. I achieve upward mobility so that I may be safe. That is fucked up. That there is pressure to do so, and I am so moved to behave in a way to be seen differently by White people – to be seen as acceptable, a non-threat, approachable, nice – diplomatic, if you will. That is fucked up. The truth is, no matter what degrees I earn, the salary I garner, how I speak, where I live, or how well I behave, I will always be a Nigger to (some) White people and (some) American society.

Yesterday, I expressed to a White friend of mine that I am motivated to address change. I figured those who know me, know where I stand. Friends of mine have shared prophetic, smart, painful, and nuanced things. Some have strived for balanced commentary to strike a middle ground, and others have expressed outrage and grave disappointment in our society. Honestly, I am lost.

I行为, I will always be a Nigger, how I speak, where I earn, the salary I garner, how I speak, where I live, or how well I behave, I will always be a Nigger to (some) White people and (some) American society.

It’s Thursday, December 4, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I like getting a jump on the day, starting fresh and really considering what the day may have in store for me. Though, today is slightly different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man. Today is also different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man.

Others before me have said this, and it will continue to be said. Yet, there is something so jarring when you engage this idea – that I am Nigger too – for yourself. You consider how far White people – American society – have come, and see that there is no distance between slavery, Jim Crow, and today. Shaken up, you learn, admit, and am reminded this is NOT true. No Black, Brown, or Of Color body is protected, insulated, shielded, or safe in our racist society.

Here, I have to come out and say, for me, this is internalized racism. Sadly, I am motivated to achieve, gain, garner, and accrue to distance myself from my racialized Black, Brown, and Of Color family. I achieve upward mobility so that I may be safe. That is fucked up. That there is pressure to do so, and I am so moved to behave in a way to be seen differently by White people – to be seen as acceptable, a non-threat, approachable, nice – diplomatic, if you will. That is fucked up. The truth is, no matter what degrees I earn, the salary I garner, how I speak, where I live, or how well I behave, I will always be a Nigger to (some) White people and (some) American society.

Others before me have said this, and it will continue to be said. Yet, there is something so jarring when you engage this idea – that I am Nigger too – for yourself. You consider how far White people – American society – have come, and see that there is no distance between slavery, Jim Crow, and today. Shaken up, you learn, admit, and am reminded this is NOT true. No Black, Brown, or Of Color body is protected, insulated, shielded, or safe in our racist society.
particularly about oppression, power, and privilege, rarely am I on the front lines. I train, teach, and in-
struct in the comforts of the ivory tower without ever being in the trenches alongside those whose causes I believe in, whose causes are mine. With shame, this question, what am I called to do, is so far-reaching that it sometimes makes me wonder whether I have sold out. Deep down, I know not every role in this fight against injustice is for everybody, but have I really interrogated how complicit I might be in the role I occupy as educator in institution, only? Fast forward again. It’s time for the dialogue. Ev-
everyone is gathered, and almost done eating pizza. Moments before I stuff a slice down my throat, and try to get centered before I enter the space. My nerves are bouncing a bit; I can tell I’m anxious, and feeling uncertain about how the dialogue will go. The room is full - sit on the floor. Looking around the room, I wel-
come and thank everyone for coming. We are multi-
cultural. I look out onto every hue of skin tones as I share about the intentions I have sat for our time together. I call for people to dig deep for compassion, and care, while being honest and authentic. My voice is soft. "How might you feel if you were Michael Brown’s parents?" I posed this question to the group and asked that people pair up with the person next to them to discuss. The volume in the room rises. Five minutes past, I quiet the room by chiming some bells. Nervous still bouncing, I stare out onto faces with varying looks. Some bewildered, confused, neutral, and already drained. I solicit a few responses: “I would be en-
raged.” “I’m not a parent so it’s hard to imagine, I guess frustrated.” “I would feel like I could kill Darren Wilson.” Emotions in the space are high. Moving through anxiously, I express gratitude to those who shared, and ask my colleague to facilitate the next portion of our dialogue.

“Talking about race makes you feel what, please fill in the blank.” Mary opens with a provocative prompt. Desiring to illicit and make emotions present, Mary asks every person to respond. Words like uneasy, vul-
nerable, anxious, and confused are shared. Tension in-
creases in the room, as folks are uncertain about what will happen next. Carefully, Mary thanks each person for sharing and proceeds to divide the group for our next segment, affinity groups. The White people exit, and People of Color stay in the room. I stay. I begin: “In times like these, we need to be able to come together to express ourselves and put words to our emotions with people who look like us, and may feel similarly to how we are feeling.” Now the space is officially open for all of the People of Color gathered; they begin to share. Not long into comments, tears stream down so many faces. Mothers discuss their fears in having to raise Black and Brown boys. Almost mothers listen intently, echoing the fear and empha-
sizing the insurmountable apprehension of what is to come. Men of Color talk about the inescapability of the system despite playing by the rules. “Damned if I do, damned if I don’t,” one Black man shared. A police officer shares that each day he promises his two-year old twins that he will come home that night. The dia-
logue is complex, nuanced, and hard. During several moments my eyes began to well up, though I don’t cry. This lasts for more than two hours.

Final fast forward, it’s Friday, December 5, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I wake up hun-
gry. Almost sprinting to the kitchen, I make my coffee, toast waffles, and broil some sausage. My roommate is up, seated in the dining room. I haven’t seen him in a few days. I suppose I’ve hidden away a bit in the chaos of Ferguson and Eric Gardner. I tell him that yesterday was my angry-Black-man day. I shared that I felt more yesterday than I had in the previous days concerning all that was happening in the United States. I ask Sean if I can share my writing with him. I begin: “Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson...” Still, he sits, somewhat unaffected. I finish. He asks: “How are you feeling now?”

What a profound question, I thought to myself. I strug-
gled to respond. Swirling in my head were phrases like: “Of course I expected this outcome from the juries.” And, “history is bound to repeat itself.” Yet, I suppose I thought or hoped the outcome would be different. And now, as Sean asked me that question, I feel with a little less hope. As a Black man living in a racist society, I expect the weight of judgment to ben-
fit White people and disadvantage Black people. However, for me to remain hopeful about the fight against injustice, I know I require a morsel of prog-
ress – just a moment that bares the light of possibility. Simply, a small declaration that justice is achievable, even with all the injustice surrounding us. I suppose I thought that the Eric Gardner decision on the heels of Ferguson would offer me that light. I thought: “we can get it right this time.” Even if the outcome of the