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What Is My Role in This Situation? A White Girl's Perspective in Ferguson, MO

Samantha Shepherd

On August 9, 2014, something happened that changed the way I saw the world. I saw the world quite literally in black and white up to that point. This date has so much significance because that was the day Mike Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri by police officer Darren Wilson. After that I began to see in color and see how color leaks through our thought filters down into our considerations and systems; it impacts our everyday attention and ideologies. This very day not only stopped my colorblind way of thinking, but it aligned my allyship in the Black Lives Matter movement. Why would a white girl from the suburbs of New Jersey care about someone being shot in Ferguson? Why would this drive a change within me that should not have been such a big deal in the first place? Throughout my explanation of the moment and how it led me to find my voice for advocacy, I will address the answer to those questions and why I am still talking about it almost four years later. Throughout this paper, I will explain my purpose in writing this piece and I will explain my racial identity. I will give a brief introduction of Black Lives Matter as well as explain my experience in Ferguson, MO. Finally, I will explain my takeaways from that experience.

Purpose

It has been almost four years since officer Darren Wilson took the life of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. This paper is a case study, since I am looking at one instance in which the life of a black body was lost at the hands of our justice system. I am looking at this particular case because I have personal experience with it. Additionally, much like Mike Brown, there are many unarmed black bodies that are still losing their lives at the hands of our justice system. Unfortunately, this is too common of an occurrence and only a handful of the names of the black

bodies lost at the hand of the justice system become so popularized that their names can easily roll off our tongues. We as a culture have become desensitized to the trauma that occurs on black bodies.

I am still writing and talking about Ferguson because in four years, nothing has gotten better. In my experience with Alternative Breaks, we say that when you go to another community to do service and you stop talking about that community, you are stealing from that community. After I left Ferguson, I could not stop thinking about what one of the community members said: “I am Mike Brown and Ferguson is everywhere” (Ferguson Duty to Win, 2015). This really drove home for me that what happened in Ferguson happens in a lot of places in the United States. I just had the privilege, if you will, to work alongside a community that was healing. My purpose in writing this paper is twofold. First, I wish to point out that the media creates a dominant narrative after times of crisis and this often creates a story that the community “deserved it.” Second, in order to be a true advocate I need to explain a handful of moments that helped me realize my racial identity and how I was missing my role in something bigger than me. It was not until these moments that I started to question how my being white plays a role in my everyday life, society, and the Black Lives Matter movement. For this paper, I will juxtapose my narrative with the dialogue from people who are on the ground in the movement and the opinions of scholars. These writings were taken from my journal while in Ferguson and they appear as the italicized pieces in this paper, almost as a disrupter to the dominant narrative. At first, I thought my intent in writing this was to explain how the Black Lives Matter movement changed me and how much I learned from being in Ferguson. However, I have realized that the purpose in writing this paper is to explore my role as an ally and to explain what my role is as a white female in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Personal Introduction

“Earlier that week I had been at a graduation party answering 101 questions from my family about my intentions to go on this trip.

Why was I going?

Who would I be with?

Did I know anyone?

How long would I be there?

Typical run of the mill questions. But the look in my family's eyes told me there was nothing typical about where I was going. I was going to Ferguson, Missouri. This past year the news has painted a picture of Ferguson in which this community appeared in pure upheaval and turmoil. When you watched the news the community members were on the screen burning down their own town. I remember watching and thinking to myself, that's not right, why would someone burn their own community down. Naturally, not everyone thought this way. It is easy to watch something and accept it as the absolute truth. It is only natural that my family thought I was insane and would end up in the hospital when I told them I was going on a service trip to Ferguson, Missouri.

But my desire to go to Ferguson starts before my sister's graduation party and the pressing questions from family. It started on a hot day in August. I had been reading Buzzfeed when an article about a teenager being shot by a police officer popped up on the homepage. I stayed in my bed for hours trying to process why a teenager would be shot by a police officer when he was clearly unarmed. The only thing I knew is that this did not sit right with me. I followed the case closely. Anytime I saw something about Ferguson, Mike Brown, or Darren Wilson, I had to read it. It became too addicting. I remember watching the protests and reading the statuses on social media belittling the people of this town, people passing judgments based on what they saw. Did they really understand? Did I understand? Could reading as much material covered on this small town make me understand what happened there? No. I needed to go there and understand why this could happen. I needed to rid this unsettling feeling inside of me.”

My involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement and the purpose of my trip to Ferguson directly relates to the Black Lives Matter movement's values, but it took me some time to see the correlation between the two. As a junior at James Madison University, I found myself questioning my priorities in the community and I discovered that I had a passion for service and for having a role in larger social movements. I was a Spring Break Leader for an Alternative Break. This position entails the responsibility of going on a retreat where I was introduced to

topics such as systematic oppression. I was so mad that this was the first time I was learning about this because ultimately that could mean I was perpetuating the problem. After this realization, I got a job in the Community Service-Learning office as a Weekend Break Coordinator. In this role, I planned local weekend service opportunities for students of James Madison University. I wanted to give people the tools they needed to have the same epiphany I had because I found it outrageous that it took me that long to learn about the advantages and disadvantages in our society.

Part of my job enables me to attend a conference with other students who hold the same or similar positions to me. This conference is a weeklong over the summer and you can attend with students from your staff or go alone. Break Away, the umbrella organization for Alternative Breaks, sends you a pre-packet containing information about the community you will be working with, the social issue, educational articles, community partners and other logistical information. It also explained the layout of our days, stipulations that we would do service, get educational information about the social issue at night after dinner, and then receive training on our positions and how to relay what we learned back to our school. I had four conference options to choose from (Ferguson, Ohio, Atlanta, and Arizona) each working with a different social issue. However, the second I saw Ferguson as an option on the list, I knew where I was going.

Break Away set goals for us to hold ourselves accountable to throughout the week. The goals were to deconstruct the dominant narrative, understand structural racism and its impact on individuals, and see grassroots organizations in action as a way to build power in communities. I will address how we as a group realized how achievable these goals were and how this set the frame for the week and understanding the movement. The overarching reason for my going to Ferguson was to learn how to empower communities that have been taken advantage of and to

gain the tools to be the counter narrative for the movement. The movement's guiding principles are to affirm that black lives matter and intervene in the political and social ideology that targets black lives.

In the summer of 2015 I went to Ferguson, Missouri to work with a grassroots organization, #OperationHelporHush, to deconstruct the dominant narrative and to help with rebuilding morale in the small suburban town. When I first learned that I would be doing those two things, I had no idea the totality of what we would be doing. Having closely followed what was going on in Ferguson after Mike Brown's death, I thought I knew more than the dominant narrative. However, I only knew a single story until I got there. I really only knew what the media told me, which was that Mike Brown, an unarmed black teen was shot by a police officer for "stealing" cigarillos, which were never found on his body. As a response to this, the community of Ferguson protested. I found out much more when I got to Ferguson.

It is important to know my perspective on this experience is that of a white female growing up in a small suburb. I had little to no experience with a diverse neighborhood. In fact, I was unaware of my privilege until my junior year of college. I was always aware that I was white, just not aware what that entailed. To be completely honest I grew up almost "colorblind". It was not until I read Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" that I began to critically think about race. What got me thinking was the idea that Band-Aids are flesh colored, which means that they will always match my skin color, the dominant race. They are meant to encompass my needs and marginalize others. They are a constant reminder of who has power and who does not. The same day I read this piece, my sorority sister tweeted that she was upset that emojis were not black like her. I was so disturbed by this and started to think, how

many things are catered to the dominant race and end up marginalizing people? How many of these things go unnoticed because I am white and they are in my favor?

My mom raised me with a critical lens to recognize how people use race as an identifying factor for those who are not of the dominant race. As an outsider in this community who has the experience of being white and female, that will be something that I will address a lot in this paper, because it is the only identity I can draw upon when I am trying to understand my experience in Ferguson. I also will not be able to understand and relate to the Ferguson community because of this identity and at times this made me feel really confused and uncertain. My whole life has been able to fit into a cookie cutter lens until that moment, and that was extremely hard to grapple with, and continues to be a challenge.

Black Lives Matter is a movement that sparked a fire within me. It shattered my cookie cutter lens and made me see how my white privilege interacts with the world. In the next section of this paper, I will talk about how the Black Lives Matter movement came to be.

Introduction to Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement started as a Twitter campaign in 2012 (Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2015). The campaign was created after Trayvon Martin was murdered and George Zimmerman was acquitted of the charges. Trayvon Martin was also put on trial after his death for his own murder (Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2015). Furthermore, this movement has swept the nation and gained a lot of support after the shooting of Mike Brown on August 9th in 2014 (Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2015). The movement is focused on affirming the value of black lives through combating systematic and political oppression. It is a call to action in response to the devaluation and dehumanization of black lives and racism that is still prevalent today (Garza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2015).

Since the movement has started there has been a lot of controversy in the media about race and race relations. In fact, a critical eye has been placed on police departments and the correlation between the rise of unarmed black lives lost and white police officers. In 2015 alone we saw Sandra Bland's death, the truth about Laquan McDonald's death, a lack of prosecution for Tamir Rice's death, Dylann Roof's plot to start a race war, and Concerned Student 1950.

All of these are important but what is more important is the way the media covers these events. The media made Sandra Bland appear like a criminal when she was pulled over for failing to use a proper turning signal. The media showed pictures of her in an orange jumpsuit rather than a picture of her before she was incarcerated while they talked about the incident with the police that ended her life. Whereas for Tamir Rice who was only 12 years old when he died, the media talked about him as a man rather than a boy and used that as justification for killing him. "He had reason to perceive the boy--described in the 911-- call as a man waving and pointing a gun" (Stacy, 2015). On the flip side, when Dylann Roof murdered nine people in a predominately black church in South Carolina this summer, the media talked about his childhood and how he was a loner, not to mention he was taken into police custody alive. "He was a really sweet kid. He was quiet. He only had a few friends" (Glenza, 2015). The Black Lives Matter movement opened my eyes to racial injustice. Through this movement I saw how systematic oppression plays out in our justice system. Ultimately this is what led me to Ferguson, the Black Lives Matter movement and my realization that I could no longer be a part of this injustice.

Experience in Ferguson

"The humid air filled our lungs as we belted Avril Lavigne's Girlfriend at the top of our lungs. We only met a week before and we would be saying our bittersweet goodbyes tomorrow. In that moment, I knew a lot of things, yet I felt so uncertain about so many more. But one thing I was sure about was that I was in the right place with the right people, and for the first time in my life I had finally figured out what made Sam happy- fighting injustice."

In a movement like Black Lives Matter, dialogue is very important to the success of the movement, whether it's on mediated forms of communication, protests, or face to face. I will identify some key leaders in the movement and how they fit into the movement's guiding principle. During my time in Ferguson, I realized the weight that being white carries. I realized that because I have this unearned privilege there are so many moments that I could be working to be someone's ally, even if that is in silent solidarity. I realized that just because I say I am an ally, that statement does not mean anything for justice. I could be perpetuating more harm than good by claiming that identity. My intent in talking about my time in Ferguson is not for a pat on the back or to claim myself an ally, but so other white people can realize what I realized. For the rest of this paper, I am going to talk about a handful of moments when I had these realizations that I could be a better ally.

I realized these moments working with a group of influential people in Ferguson while also working with a grassroots nonprofit. Throughout the next section I will describe the nonprofit I worked with, the people I met, the work I did, and the things I learned, all of which led me to realize my role as an ally.

#OperationHelpOrHush

The first night in Ferguson, we had a site orientation session during which we met the people pioneering the movement. Charles Wade and Tasha are the founders of the grassroots organization #OperationHelpOrHush, which also started as a Twitter campaign. Interestingly enough, Charles and Tasha are friends and when Mike Brown was shot and the people who were grieving in the streets were tear gassed by police officers Tasha responded by tweeting about it. Charles responded to her tweet and immediately came to Ferguson. Due to the overexposure of the area, Charles was treated like an outsider. Nevertheless, Tasha and Charles worked together

to ensure that people who were protesting and grieving were properly hydrated and fed. They focused on the elderly and children who had been outside all day. Tasha also set up triage in her house to tend to the wounds of people who had been injured from the tear gas or other police brutality. They set up two Alternative Spring Breaks to repair some of the damages from the different waves of protesters and looters. The Alternative Spring Breakers would register people to vote, plant gardens and paint murals. “I’m all for protesting,” said Charles “but it’s a state of emergency for the people we’re not discussing. And the people who no one is discussing are those experiencing not paycheck-to-paycheck poverty, but *no-* paycheck poverty. The media looks to Twitter, but this is a story about people who aren’t even on Twitter. This is a movement of everyday people who understand that injustice should not be tolerated, that oppression affects so many. *That* is the face of the movement—not Twitter” (Kendzior, 2015).

I learned that there might not be one face of Black Lives Matter, but many faces. It was faces like Charles and Tasha that are keeping the movement alive and are taking care of the healing community in Ferguson. They are a face to a leaderless movement. After meeting Charles and Tasha, I realized they were not alone. From talking with a few other community members, I realized Mike Brown was more than a person, he was a symbol.

Mike Brown Saved My Life

Brittney and Alexis are two more faces of the movement who are closer in age me, and thus they resonate a little more with me. They are two black queer women who gave up college to fight for this movement. I did not know that they sacrificed this much for the movement until I started writing this paper and researched them. Brittany and Alexis both dropped out of college to protest for what they believed in. This speaks volumes about them as women and protesters because they do not use this as a bragging right or a talking piece. They did not bring this up

once when I was with them. Alexis was quoted saying, “Mike Brown saved her life” and “Mike Brown symbolizes purpose” (Templeton, 2015). I believe that this idea of Mike Brown being more than just a boy who was shot by police is evident in her language. She is saying that this is a wakeup call, that Mike Brown could have been anyone and that her purpose is to use her voice and advocacy to ensure that no one else’s life is lost like Mike Brown’s. These ideals become evident in the rhetoric they use to protest, “It is our duty to fight for freedom, it is our duty to win, we must love and support each other, we have nothing to lose but our chains”, “Who are you?”, “Mike Brown.”, “Who am I?” “Mike Brown.”, “Whose streets?”, “Our streets.”, “Whose streets?”, “Our streets.” (Ferguson Duty to Win, 2015). They view protesting and the sacrifice they made as a duty to fight and they can draw a parallel between what happened to Mike Brown to something that could happen to any person of color.

“As we played four corners the questions got increasingly more thought provoking and the divide between race was visual in the room. The small classroom in the church was silent as Nico read statements that made me analyze my reasons for coming to Ferguson and how much space I was taking up as an ally. There were lines on the ground so we can see which corner was which but the more visible line was the tension in the room when Nico read this statement, “I think about my race every day.” After he read that, the only people who moved were the black people in our group and they moved to the strongly agree corner and all of the white people/ other identities were in disagree or strongly disagree. To see that divide was like hitting a brick wall at full speed. From that moment on I thought about what it was like to have your race affect your every interaction. When your skin color is a defining attribute about you. This was the moment I really realized I was white and what it meant to be white.”

After meeting Charles, Tasha, Brittney and Alexis I was left wondering what it meant to be white and how this impacts how I move in the world. Now I will talk about some projects I worked on in which I saw how my racial identity affects how much space I take.

Highway Cleanup

“I expected to get answers. I got more questions. Melissa and Demetria, my site leaders, who were the same age as me and had just been here a few days earlier to lead our group, said that driving through here would make me feel this way but I did not believe them. Someone got shot outside of my apartment at school and it never felt this eerie. Granted, the situation is

completely different. When we first started to pick up trash along the road where Mike Brown had been jaywalking, I realized it could have been anyone. It could have been Jovon. It could have been Nassir. It could have been one of the boys in my group for the conference in Ferguson. The only thing that separated Mike Brown from the boys I just listed was a time and a place and that was horrifying.”

Earlier in this paper I addressed the goals we created as a group. We wanted to deconstruct the dominant narrative, meaning we wanted to work to change the conversation around Mike Brown's death. We wanted people to see that the news has been feeding into this story that Mike Brown deserved to die instead of investigating a bigger issue. In the middle of the week we revisited our goals and quickly found that deconstructing the dominant narrative is not something you can do overnight, or in a week, or in a month. Instead it is something you have to constantly work on. In the article “I Will Not Be Returning to Ferguson,” Ryan Schuessler talks about how he saw the community of Ferguson being exploited and how he worked to change the dominant narrative in his own field of work. “There are now hundreds of journalists from all over the world coming to Ferguson to film what has become a spectacle. I get the sense that many feel this is their career-maker. In the early days of all this, I was warmly greeted and approached by Ferguson residents. They were glad that journalists were there. The past two days, they do not even look at me and blatantly ignore me. I recognize that I am now just another journalist to them, and their frustration with us is clear. In the beginning, there was a recognizable need for media presence, but this is the other extreme. They need time to work through this as a community, without the cameras” (Schuessler, 2014).

“As we walked along this road I counted the number of young boys who were different than Mike Brown. I thought of the fear their mothers must have every time they leave the house. I did not see how picking up trash is helping these kids from becoming another Mike Brown, Tamir Rice or Trayvon Martin. Because it's not. But as I picked up trash I thought about how I was helping the community see that they were valued. Black Lives Matter. It was part of the goal.”

When I first saw the phrase “All Lives Matter,” I was disrupted at first. It almost felt like

this narrative was a direct response to Black Lives Matter telling the movement to sit down and be quiet. This is an example of white anxiety.

White Anxiety

As part of an orientation to our social issue we watched a documentary specific to Ferguson. This documentary specifically addressed police brutality in Ferguson and how race plays a role in the justice system as well as oppression. In Ferguson there are ninety municipalities. This means in a small town alone there are ninety subdivisions. To further divide the town, there are eighty-one courts. You can get a ticket in one municipality one hour and in the next hour receive another ticket in another municipality and then be tried in two different courts. The documentary worded it as if the justice system operates at a profit at the dismay of the community. In 2014, three people killed themselves waiting to move from one cell to the next because jails were overcrowded and people cannot afford to pay the fines they are receiving. Failing to use the crosswalk, which is the reason Mike Brown was questioned by Darren Wilson, is 500 dollars. You can see it quickly gets to an amount people cannot afford. In the documentary, they showed a statement from the mayor saying that he wanted to increase fines and increase policing on black bodies, essentially making money off of black people.

One concept that the documentary introduced to me that I could not shed was the idea of white anxiety and black rage. In society, there is no space for black power. It spills in to the street and white anxiety becomes the guiding force. When white anxiety leads the way, black rage is created. This is the dominant narrative. In the articles written about Mike Brown this black rage was evident. In an article in the New York Times, the title was “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling with Problems and Promise.” In this article, the author went further to make claims that he was “no angel (Eligon, 2014). Here, white anxiety makes a child who died at

the hands of an authority figure seem like he suffered from black rage to lessen the burden of white anxiety. I think white anxiety happens when the dominant figure is challenged. Instead of asking why that is so uncomfortable we create this other dialogue in order to shift the tension onto someone else so we do not have to face the repercussions.

Tension was something I faced in Ferguson. There were moments where I felt my hands curl into fists and my shoulders press into my ears as my body performed tension. One of these tense moments was at the community dinner.

Community Dinner

The Community Dinner, a dinner we had on my birthday, was momentous for my growth as an ally.

“And you, white feminists, you really piss me off” she said. I thought she was speaking to a room of mostly white women who came here to work with this community. Why should we piss you off? I was overwhelmed by cognitive dissonance.

“You walk around complaining about your privileges and expect others to relate but you do not even realize how you are further marginalizing people. You and I will never have the same struggle as women.” She said more admittedly.

I was still uncomfortable; I had never spent a birthday talking about how my skin color made others feel inferior or anger. It was not until later that night that I realized that she was right. I would never understand her struggle. I could not wrap my mind around what it would be like to be a female and be black. I can only work to bring everyone to the table and make sure that everyone's intersecting identities are in a more just world.

As a Spring Break Leader, we learn about how to be a “good ally.” However, this was done through a PowerPoint slide and a piece of paper that defines allyship through different lenses. After my first Alternative Spring Break, I thought I was a great ally. I was educating people about my social issue, I was blogging, I was telling the stories of the people I met there, and I felt like I was making a difference because that is what I was taught.

In Ferguson, I had a rude awakening. I was the same type of ally I was when I got back from my first Alternative Break. I was sharing thoughts and articles. But that was not what this community wanted or needed. The Community Dinner was created so we can thank the people we worked with in the community while at the same time share the stories of what we gained. It kind of turned into a vent session, with the members of the community starting to divulge their anger of the past year over the ice cream and baked apples. Their anger was for a multitude of reasons. I am not speaking on their behalf here. Rather I am just regurgitating some of what was said in that room that night. They were angry Mike Brown was dead, not just Mike Brown, but everything Mike Brown was and is. They were angry about the injustices done to black bodies. They were angry about having to continually explain the injustices done to black bodies. They were angry about what had happened in their community in the past couple of months. They were tired of seeing their hometown in the news in flames. They were sick of seeing unfamiliar faces in their streets. They were done with seeing the press in Ferguson, putting salt in their wounds. This was raw and real and at one point a table fell and they all hid under a table because they were afraid it was gunshots and were still suffering from PTSD. In this vent session, they talked about everything from feminism to whiteness to outsiders to allyship. But I kind of lumped them all together because I was all of those things.

I remember thinking if I was all of these things, what is my role in this movement. Am I an ally? Am I perpetuating the cycle of oppression I came here to help fight? Can I ever help fight it if I am not really a part of it? What is my role as an ally?

Allies

Charles said “Allies, where were you when we were protesting? Yes, you were a voice on social media, but we need more than that, we cannot fight this battle on our own” (Charles Wade,

personal communication, 2015). I was overwhelmed with guilt because I was the type of ally who shared an article but was not the type of person who backed up these articles or ideas with actions. Instead I was preaching ideas. I learned that in order to be a good ally you need to ask what your community or movement needs. You need to realize that you are not a leader in this experience and you need to stand behind and support the group. Someone once told me when you are an ally you do not raise your hand to guide people, you bring your hand down to help people rise up. When talking about oppression and allyship we have to realize that oppression exists like a birdcage. Not only one thing oppresses the oppressed; it is systematic and structural. So, when looking at someone who is a member of an oppressed group, we cannot see all of the things that oppress them because they are not always evident and exist in multiple forms like the rings on a birdcage.

On an Alternative Break, we have a reflection every night to connect the service we did to the social issue and gain a deeper perspective. After every reflection, I am always left wondering why, why is this still a problem, why are there not easier answers, why is there not something else I can do? There is one question I never ask though: why is this important. I know why this issue of race is still important. It is important because we do not live in a post-racial society. Just because we had a black president does not mean all black people have equal opportunities compared to white people. There are new ways that people are oppressed. An example is the hashtag, “Blue Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter.” Both of these social media movements are saying that black lives are not equal to white lives. They are saying that the social movement that black lives are trying to start to raise awareness about the injustices that occur against black lives are not valid and pass them off as people being sensitive. As long as people pass off issues of race and diversity as being too sensitive, there will be a reason why this

dialogue should continue to occur and the hashtag “Black Lives Matter” should continue to exist. A mother should never have to worry about her son or daughter coming home because of police brutality.

Conclusion

After coming back from Ferguson, I had a few takeaways: being aware of my race, understanding allyship, and having a good picture of systematic oppression. I never thought about my race or the impact it has on my daily life. I never realized until I went to Ferguson that my race plays a part in oppression. I have the choice to use my unearned privileges to give others a hand up. I never even thought about what it meant to be white and my role in allyship. I thought that being a good ally entailed educating others, but I was wrong. That is only one piece. Allyship cannot really be pushed into a box. It is not taking up space of the oppressed group; it is meeting their needs as a community while also empathizing with their struggle and advocating for change. Last but not least, I saw systematic oppression in a context other than a textbook. Seeing oppression in a visual form made the issue more humanized and lit a fire in me. It made me enraged that we have become conditioned to continuously fall into cycles of oppression and the institutions that are supposed to serve and protect only perpetuate this issue. To further the idea of oppression, when we as humans are uncomfortable with something, our first reaction is to reject it. We need to get to a place where we are comfortable to not reject things that are different or make us feel uncomfortable because this is the only way we will grow.

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