

What Do We Mean When We Say, “Structural Racism”?

*A Walk down West Florissant Avenue,
Ferguson, Missouri*

Walter Johnson

In 1928, Walter Benjamin published a long essay titled “One-Way Street,” composed of fragmentary meditations on his times. The essay takes the form of a walk down a city street, recording impressions, thoughts, provocations, and inspirations at stops along the way. In the room where he eats breakfast, Benjamin considers the mystical properties of dreams retold before coffee. At the newsstand, he notes the proliferation of brochures and magazines, and wonders if the history of the book will outlast the twentieth century. As he passes a sandwich-board man walking up and down the street, Benjamin comments on the terrible eloquence of the placard on the man’s chest in an era of increasingly disposable human labor: “On sale.” At the post office, he imagines the collector’s empire of stamps, where kings and queens are reordered according to denomination and defaced by cancellation. Sitting on a park bench, he experiences the soothing sensation of overhearing a whispered conversation in a foreign tongue. At home again in his study, he wishes that the words would flow as easily from his pen as the smoke from his cigarette.¹

But it is with Benjamin’s visit to the fortune-teller that I want to begin. Arriving at the entrance to her parlor, which is marked by a sign that reads “Madame Ariane—Second Courtyard on the Left,” he reflects on the character of time. “He who asks fortune-tellers the future unwittingly forfeits an inner intimation of coming events that is a thousand times more exact than anything they may say.” Benjamin uses the phrase “presence of mind” to describe what he means: “Presence of mind is an extract of the future and precise awareness

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of the present moment [that is] more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events.” It is a way of taking note of the fullness of the present, of both the structural imprint of the past on the present and the emergent tendency of the future. “Presence of mind” offers the righteous the chance to attempt to bend the present toward a better future, and it rebukes the empty regrets of the indifferent: How could you have not known this was possible—on this street, at this time, in this country? “Did you really not know?”² Presence of mind, for Benjamin, is a way of thinking about and being in time that is at once historical, prophetic, and actively engaged in the fullness of the moment. And its achievement is a bodily art as much as a mental one; it is the sort of understanding that comes from walking down the street.

The street I want to walk along today is West Florissant Avenue, in Ferguson, Missouri, south of the burned-out Quik Trip and the famous McDonald’s, south of the intersection with Chambers Road, south almost to the city limit, at the corner of Ferguson Avenue and West Florissant. There on August 4, 2014, Emerson Electric announced third-quarter sales of \$6.3 billion, down about 1 percent from the second quarter, but undergirded by a record backlog of orders.³ A quarter mile to the northeast, five days later, Officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown. “Ferguson police just executed my unarmed son,” read the placard held by Brown’s stepfather, Louis Head, as he walked back and forth at the scene.⁴

While the distance between the spot on Canfield Drive where Michael Brown died and the corporate headquarters of Emerson Electric is so small that the shots fired by Officer Wilson must have been audible in the company lunchroom, I do not want to draw too direct a line between them. I do not want to suggest that Emerson Electric is responsible for the murder of Michael Brown, at least not according to any conventional understanding of responsibility in our society. I do, however, want to use the proximity of Emerson’s corporate headquarters and the shooting of Michael Brown to suggest something about the framing determinants of historical events: ways the relationship between the past and the future is hedged in, limited, perhaps even determined by past histories and the habits of mind they support.

After trying to explain what I mean on a fairly abstract level and with reference to the long history of the United States, I want to narrow the aperture a bit and think about the history of racism and real estate, of white supremacy and wealth, of *structural racism* with particular attention to the history of twentieth-century Saint Louis. I want, finally, to return to Ferguson, the recent past, and the notion of “presence of mind.”

Before I begin, I need to say one other thing. I am not a trained expert on the history of the twentieth century, urban history, or the history of Saint Louis. But the history that I am talking about is my history, the history that I have lived through as an American, a Missourian, and a white person. It is a

history I have helped to make; one I have contested, but also one from which I have benefited. It is my own history, as well as our common future, that I want to discuss with you.

The History of “Freedom”; or, History’s Waiting Room (Colored)

Let us begin with “freedom”: not the real thing, not actual human emancipation of the sort that might have saved Michael Brown and might yet save others like him, but with the idea of freedom as a principle of historical development: as an eschatology, a theory of time that is at once vectoral, apocalyptic, and metaphysical. Vectoral because it describes the direction of time immanent in every given moment; apocalyptic because it is organized by a vision of the end of time—the moment when freedom has been achieved; and metaphysical because it is a belief system that is derived from principles beyond an empirically observable course of events. Belief in the course of freedom is not shaken by evidence of the bonded and violent character of the temporal world.

As a way of illustrating this belief—a belief so powerful and pervasive that I think we might fairly term it an ideology—allow me to quote Ryan C. Crocker, the United States Ambassador to Iraq, testifying before Congress in 2007 as Operation Iraqi Freedom devolved for the first time, though not the last, into bloody, sectarian chaos. “I have found it helpful, during my time in Iraq,” the ambassador said,

to reflect on our own history. At many points in the early years, our survival as a nation was questionable. Our efforts to build the institutions of government were not always successful in the first instance. And tough issues—such as slavery, universal suffrage, civil rights, and states['] rights—were resolved only after acrimonious debate and sometimes violence.⁵

Read quickly, the statement is unremarkable: it expresses the sort of sentiments that one might expect to be expressed by an earnest, thoughtful man trying to sort his way through maddeningly complex events using a common-sense notion of US history. Its basic premises, which we could find in countless other quotations drawn from our recent history, include the following:

1. US history is framed by a progression from slavery to freedom.
2. History is a writ for US military action in Iraq; or, put more broadly, the principles of historical development evident in the history of the United States are universally applicable.
3. Freedom is a political condition, defined by the achievement of political and civil rights.

4. African American history is the back-story of the history of American Freedom.

This notion of historical development as a straight line has several remarkable effects. Most importantly, perhaps, it conscripts the history of slavery to the history of freedom, framing slavery as a prologue to the emergence of The Real American History out of the ashes of the Civil War. This gesture has the attendant effect of conscripting Black history to the history of freedom: rendering the history of African American people visible only insofar as it expresses their gradual attainment of full freedom—or at least of the civil and political rights that seem to define Crocker’s version of the endpoint of the history of human emancipation. African American people, in this telling, are both the symbol of freedom and the avatars of its incompleteness.

It is the second point that I want to take up and expand a bit, by way of ethnographic observation of my students. Last spring, in my lecture course on the history of the nineteenth century, I introduced an exercise titled “The American Heroes Project.” In so doing, I explained to the students that I often received teaching evaluations that said things like “This course represents no known version of the history of the United States” and “This professor hates America.” Stuff like that. So, I thought that by allowing the students to nominate their own heroes and reading their nominations aloud to the class, I could demonstrate both a degree of openness to views of history other than my own as well as a recognition of some of the truly extraordinary lives our common history has produced. Over the course of the semester, the students made thirty-two nominations, and, in the last weeks of class, we organized them into a bracket and voted them out, round by round, until we had a champion.

There were some sports heroes and some soldiers nominated. There were a couple of captains of industry and a couple of scientists. Three justices of the Supreme Court. But the plurality of the American Heroes nominated by my majority-white students were African American, all of them associated in one way or another with the “freedom struggle”: among them Jackie Robinson, Thurgood Marshall, and the eventual winner, Rosa Parks. On one level, that seemed predictable to the point of disappointment: given the chance to choose, my undergraduate class at Harvard came up with exactly the same result that I would expect from my son’s sixth-grade class at Cambridge Friends School. But, on another level, it seemed extraordinary: vexing, hopeful, disorienting.

In the United States of America—a nation in which African American men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men; in which one in nine African American men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five are currently incarcerated, and thus not subject to the protection of the Thirteenth Amendment; in which one in three African American men will be incarcerated at some point during their lives; in which the leading cause of death for African

Americans under the age of twenty is a handgun; in which Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam walked away free after murdering Emmett Till; in which Stephen Sullivan walked free after shooting Eleanor Bumpurs; in which Sean Carroll, Richard Murphy, Edward McMellon, and Kenneth Boss walked free after shooting Amadou Diallo; in which George Zimmerman walked free after killing Trayvon Martin; in which Darren Wilson walks free after killing Michael Brown; and on and on and on—in those United States, our heroes are Black people.

This massive, galling contradiction—the contradiction between an obdurate reality in which the actually existing Black population of the United States is subject to economic abjection, incarceration in numbers that are unprecedented in the history of the world, and wanton killing, on the one hand, and a historical common sense in which Black people serve as the avatars of freedom—seems to me to be one of the fundamental problems of our times.

The reigning solution to this problem is the same solution used by Ryan Crocker to reconcile the reality of the chaotic violence of everyday life in Iraq with the utopian promise of Operation Iraqi Freedom: doubling down on the idea of freedom as a principle of historical development. According to this story, the history of discrimination in the United States—the denial of the franchise, the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from the provisions of the labor-protecting Wagner Act and Social Security Acts, the officially sanctioned redlining of the Federal Housing Administration, the still-segregated character of our schools, the 50 percent rate of poverty among Black children, etc., etc.—are simply instances of the incomplete character of this history of “freedom” at any given point in time. In this telling of history, the elimination of injustice is pushed forward in time according to the seemingly inexhaustible temporality of “not yet”: African Americans are consigned to history’s waiting room, the same room in which, the sociologist Michael Hanchard suggests, Martin Luther King wrote a book titled *Why We Can’t Wait*.⁶

Is “Not Yet” Still Enough? Has It Ever Been?

In their recent book, *Racecraft: the Soul of Inequality in American Life*, the historian Barbara Fields and the sociologist Karen Fields pose the following question. Given that the premise that race is socially constructed has become so generally accepted that even a well-trained Labrador retriever could be expected to assent to its terms, how is it that people in the United States continue to see the world in black and white—to imagine that there is something about racial difference that is more than skin deep? Race-thinking, they suggest in answer, is “an invisible ontology,” a way of rationalizing the evident order of material reality—white privilege, Black disadvantage—by imagining that the explanation can be found at the level of natural rather than social history, by imagining that the historical ravages of racism can somehow be explained in reference to the underlying reality of race.⁷

Fields and Fields root their account of “racecraft” in the history of the American Revolution: the social reality of African American slavery at the moment of the inauguration of the history of US “freedom.” The contrast between the declaration “that all men are created equal” and the manifest fact that all men were not equal framed the birth of the nation with a question it has never outrun: well, why not? The reigning answer—the Founders’ saving fiction, they suggest—was the idea of racial difference.⁸

The notion of ritual is central to Fields and Fields’ account of the subsequent history of racism. In order to sustain themselves over time in the absence of any real foundation in biological difference, racial ideologies required constant verification in the material reality of everyday life. Seen this way, the slave auction, the chain gang, the minstrel show, the ghetto, the prison, the basketball game, the music video, etc., etc., are not simply reflections of the underlying history of racial ideology: they are the means of its reproduction over time. The ritual reapplication of race-thinking to actually existing social inequality, Fields and Fields argue, allows the past to define and limit the future of the United States, making it difficult to imagine any way that things might be different. As Frantz Fanon wrote of the double helix of colonial inequality and racial hierarchy: “The economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect. You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.”⁹ Importantly for our purposes here, Fanon’s famous observation comes at the end of a passage describing the widely divergent sensations of walking through the neighborhoods occupied by the colonists and those inhabited by the colonized.

Racial Capitalism and Real Property in the United States of America

George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* provides a detailed accounting of the ways that white freedom has been extracted from Black abjection in the twentieth century. Beginning with the whites-only character of the charter documents of the US middle class—the GI Bill, the Social Security Act, the Federal Housing Act—and following them through the history of restrictive covenants, redlining, block-busting, anti-busing, urban “renewal,” and federally subsidized suburbanization, most notably in the form of the interstate highway system, Lipsitz chronicles the history by which Black neighborhoods were downgraded, degraded, and in many cases simply destroyed during the twentieth century. US urban policy, Lipsitz shows, has consistently—indeed, unerringly—promoted both segregation and white privilege.¹⁰

In 1924, the National Association of Real Estate Brokers ratified a code of ethics that enjoined members in good standing from “introducing [into a neighborhood] members of a race or nationality . . . whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.”¹¹ In the years between 1934 and 1962, the Federal Housing Agency raised the realtors’ rule to a prin-

ciple of governance by financing \$120 billion of new housing in the United States of America, less than 2 percent of which was available to nonwhite families. For many of these years, the FHA required restrictive covenants, a buyer's written promise and binding deed restriction to resell a house only to another white person, as a precondition of the loans it made to homebuyers in all-white suburbs. In 1964, Congress explicitly exempted the FHA from the terms of the Civil Rights Act, and the federally created redlining maps of the 1940s and 1950s continued to be used by private bankers to deny Black homebuyers credit (or to charge them exorbitant rates) through the 1970s.

In 1968, Congress passed a Fair Housing Act that had been methodically stripped of any enforcement mechanisms. In the four decades after the Second World War, sixteen hundred Black neighborhoods were destroyed by "urban renewal" projects that subsidized downtown office buildings and traffic corridors designed to create bypass routes for the white suburbanites who commuted in and out of central cities every day. When housing prices shot up in the 1970s, white homeowners—the indirect legatees of decades of boundary-marking violence and the direct beneficiaries of forty years of discriminatory federal policy—realized huge gains in equity, gains that they could pass on to their heirs thanks to low taxes on inherited wealth and the ability to step up the estimated value of inherited property before paying capital gains taxes.¹²

Lipsitz's notion of the "possessive investment in whiteness" helps us to see the temporal dimension of our material life. Single-family homes serve not simply as shelters, as containers for families, but as the means by which those families transmit wealth through time. And, as Lipsitz shows, this sort of real-estate time in the United States has always-already been racial time: it is preconditioned by the history of discrimination in the housing market, both public and private, and federal sponsorship of suburbanization and white flight.

These original exclusions are continually restaged in neighborhoods all over the United States when Black buyers manage to move in and whites immediately begin to move out. This process, too, is shaped by a sort of racial real-estate time or, really, a form of microeconomic racial capitalism, as individual whites try to preserve their largest capital investment, their houses, from what they take to be the value-threatening proximity of Black people. This process, which nets real estate brokers millions and millions of dollars each year, is not narrated or perhaps even understood as the result of the sort of red-letter racism of Bull Connor or George Wallace. It is instead understood as a rational response to objective reality: property values will go down; schools will suffer; my children will not be able to have the same sort of advantages I have had. It is an effort to ensure that the future unfolds properly from the present, that capital is carried forward and class privilege is reproduced over time. At its heart is a sort of white-supremacist hypostasis: a belief that "the market" will respond negatively to the presence of Black people. This belief can at once be individually disavowed—it is not that I

hate and fear Black people, it is just that other whites, collectively known as “the housing market,” do. My worries about the value of my home and the future of my children are simply a rational response to the irrational racism of others.¹³ This admixture of disavowal and skin privilege in the real estate market, these wholly hypothetical notions of cause and effect, of time, by which past injustices are carried forward into the future: this is the microeconomic time of racial capitalism.¹⁴

While the federal subsidies to mostly white middle-class US homeowners have continued through the present day, notably in the form of the mortgage-interest tax deduction, the “possessive investment in whiteness” has taken an even more malignant shape in the era of the “War on Drugs.” Discriminatory policing, selective enforcement, disparate rates of conviction, and wide variations in sentencing by race have combined in the creation of what Michelle Alexander has termed a new “caste” system in the United States: a vast class of incarcerated and disenfranchised Black men.¹⁵ While African Americans account for 14 percent of the drug users in the United States, they constitute 35 percent of those arrested, 53 percent of those convicted, and 45 percent of those imprisoned for drug crimes.¹⁶

Where Alexander (like others, such as Loïc Wacquant) sees mass incarceration primarily as a system of racial control—a “new Jim Crow”—Ruth Wilson Gilmore has importantly pointed to the role of the carceral state in creating and perpetuating opportunities for the accumulation of white wealth. The construction, maintenance, provision, and supervision of the United States’ vast inland prison empire has underwritten the economic development of entire communities—rural towns now compete to have prisons sited within their corporate limits—and the emergence of a new segment of the white middle class.¹⁷ Indeed, a new social and political bloc has formed: for example, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, supporting the construction of new prisons, the limitation of parole, and the arming of guards in facilities housing children and low-level offenders with side-handle batons, among other things, has emerged since the 1990s as one of the most well-funded and powerful political lobbies in the state of California.¹⁸ In the postindustrial United States, the political economy of racial control is an emergent sector.

The palms-spread sigh of the “not-yet” ideology of liberalism is insufficient to explain the codependence of Black exclusion and white ascension. The histories of racialized thinking, African American dispossession, and white accumulation underwrote, vouchsafed, and verified one another throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Indeed, for many of the African Americans currently incarcerated in the United States, those whose incarceration represents the harshest version of the traffic between Black subjection and white accumulation, the bare-minimum freedoms promised by constitutional amendments that mark the beginning of the supposed history of Black freedom

in the United States—freedom from slavery, equal protection under the laws, the right to vote—are being held in abeyance. The history of Black freedom, at least in the case of the one million currently incarcerated African Americans, has been suspended pending further review.

Ferguson, 2014

The history of twentieth-century Saint Louis, Missouri, does not so much follow the historical arc of the “possessive investment in whiteness” as it exemplifies modern US history *in extremis*. By most measures, Saint Louis today is one of the three or four most segregated cities in the United States of America; one of fifteen or so cities that the urban sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton termed “hyper-segregated” in their classic *American Apartheid*. These are cities in which African Americans can go months at a time without seeing a white person in their neighborhoods; apart, of course, from policemen patrolling their beats, and, as we will see, municipal court judges collecting fines.¹⁹

The modern history of racial segregation in Saint Louis might be said to begin with the city’s 1916 law establishing separate neighborhoods for Blacks and whites, and the 1917 white supremacist pogrom in East Saint Louis. In the nineteenth century, Saint Louis had been one of the nation’s least segregated cities, but, during the First World War, thousands of Blacks from Louisiana and Mississippi took the Illinois Central northward in search of industrial jobs in cities like Saint Louis. During the spring of 1917, two thousand Blacks a week were said to be arriving in Saint Louis, and in the summer of that year white workingmen rampaged through Black neighborhoods in and near the city, killing as many as two hundred people and burning buildings that housed six thousand others. In those early years, the Black residents of Saint Louis were legally barred from moving into certain neighborhoods and concentrated in the downtown area, a pattern that was maintained even after the end of legal residential segregation through sporadic but consistent violence against Black families who moved into “white” neighborhoods.²⁰

Those years provided the racial template the city of Saint Louis has maintained to the present day. In the years between 1943 and 1960, “mostly white St. Louis County received five times as many FHA loans as did the racially mixed city of St. Louis.” As whites moved further out from the city, especially westward toward Saint Charles County, Interstate 70 was expanded to serve them. In these same years, the city of Saint Louis, again with federal support, embarked upon a program of “urban renewal,” which involved the bulldozing of some of the city’s oldest Black neighborhoods and their replacement with office buildings, to which the increasingly suburbanized middle-class workforce commuted every day along an ever-expanding number of lanes of federally funded interstate. Longtime Saint Louis civil rights activist Ivory Perry termed these twin

programs of urban redevelopment and highway expansion “black removal by white approval.”²¹

Federal law stipulated that urban redevelopment projects could proceed only on the condition that alternative housing was available to those whose homes were to be destroyed. In Saint Louis, the process of resettlement resulted in the intensification of segregation in an already segregated city. As both federal and local authorities tried to build subsidized housing to provide for the city’s mostly African American displaced population as well as for the growing number of Saint Louis residents seeking affordable housing outside the city limits, the white population of Saint Louis County organized itself in Neighborhood Improvement Associations. These groups sponsored restricted covenants, collusive whites-only real estate markets, the buying up of empty property, the buying out of Black homeowners, and, most importantly in Saint Louis, restrictive zoning laws.²²

The map of the Saint Louis metropolitan area is pasted over with what a leading historian of the city has termed “postage stamp municipalities, small cities, many of which were founded as vehicles for the white inhabitants of the unincorporated areas of the county to pass residential zoning codes banning multi-family units in the face of proposals to construct low income housing near their neighborhoods.”²³ Consequently, federal housing assistance in Saint Louis was channeled into a segregated housing market, as subsidized housing was built in the neighborhoods from which multiunit housing, and thus poor—and thus all too often Black—people were not legally excluded. The majority of Saint Louis African Americans lived in a gradually expanding corridor running from the downtown area northwestward toward Ferguson and beyond.

Like most of the rest of Saint Louis County, midcentury Ferguson was defended by exclusionary zoning codes and whites-only collusion in the real estate market. In the 1960s, Ferguson was known as a “sun-down” community: African Americans, mostly from neighboring Kinloch, came to work in the houses of wealthy whites in Ferguson during the day, but were expected to be out of town by the time the sun set. To this day, the adjacent cities are joined by only two through streets; the Ferguson city line runs down a neutral zone lined on either side with mirror-image three-way intersections. If you have been to Saint Louis, you likely landed in Kinloch. Over the past three decades, the vast majority of that city’s Black residents have been displaced to accommodate the expansion of Lambert-Saint Louis Airport. Over the same period of time, a small number of African American homeowners and a much larger number of African American renters have gradually replaced whites in Ferguson. Ferguson, which was almost entirely white in 1970, today has a Black majority.

In 1981, a federal judge from the Eastern District of Missouri found that the “severe” residential segregation of the Saint Louis metropolitan area had

resulted in a constitutionally impermissible degree of segregation in the region's schools. Tasked by the court with developing a plan to desegregate the metropolitan area, the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council and the Missouri Housing Development Commission simply ignored the court.²⁴ At the turn of the twenty-first century, almost one-half of Saint Louis County's ninety-odd municipalities continued to boast of (and I use that word advisedly) Black populations of under 5 percent.²⁵

Which brings us back to Ferguson. Thanks to the Arch City Defenders' "White Paper" on the municipal courts in the North Saint Louis County, Radley Balko's extraordinary reporting in the *Washington Post*, pending litigation in the Missouri courts against "policing-for-profit," and, finally, the Justice Department's report on the Ferguson Police Department, we now have a picture of the climate of police harassment that culminated in the murder of Michael Brown. In Ferguson during the year 2013, 86 percent of traffic stops involved Black motorists—this in spite of the facts that the population of the city is only 67 percent Black and that its roads are driven by a high number of white commuters. After being stopped, Blacks were twice as likely to be searched and twice as likely to be arrested as were whites—this in spite of the fact that, in the event of a search, whites proved to be two-thirds more likely to be caught with some sort of contraband.²⁶ The initial citations in these cases and other similar municipal violations ranged from speeding and running red lights to driving without current registration or proof of insurance to having an unmowed lawn, putting out the trash in the wrong place at the wrong time, or jaywalking.²⁷

Following these citations, the city issued over nine thousand warrants for missed court appearances and unpaid fines.²⁸ Citizens who failed to appear in court at the appointed time or to pay fines that were, according to the Arch City Defenders, "frequently triple their monthly income," were liable to be jailed, sometimes for as much as three weeks, as they awaited a municipal court date.²⁹ Those with outstanding warrants were likewise rendered ineligible for most forms of public assistance and government-provided social services.

In some ways, Ferguson's pattern of racist policing is reminiscent of famously abusive police practices like Compstat and stop-and-frisk. However, these notorious practices were framed by a theory of preemption—a theory that treated every young Black man as a potential low-level offender and every low-level offender as a potential felon. Policing in Ferguson (and many neighboring municipalities) seems to have been less focused on preventing hypothetical future crimes than on extracting revenue from an already impoverished community. "Ferguson's law enforcement practices are shaped by the City's focus on revenue rather than by public safety needs," the Justice Department concluded in a March 2015 report on Ferguson's police department. The report found that the boundary between the fiscal and police functions of the city government of Ferguson had completely broken down. The city manager and the police chief had

discussed using tickets to meet revenue benchmarks, and police officers were being evaluated on the basis of their ticket-pushing “productivity.”³⁰

In 2013 the city of Ferguson earned \$2,635,400 from municipal court fines, which accounted for 20 percent of the city budget—the second largest revenue share drawn from any single source.³¹ “Absolutely, they don’t want nothing but your money,” the Arch City Defenders’ “White Paper” quotes one defendant as saying. “It’s ridiculous how small municipalities make their lifeline off the blood of the people,” said another. “It’s an ordinance made up for them,” said still another; “It’s not a law. It’s an ordinance.”³²

The city of Ferguson—its white mayor, its majority white city council, its almost totally white police force, and its white municipal court judge—has been farming its poor and working-class Black population for revenue. Police practice in Ferguson (and in northern Saint Louis County generally) seems to represent the generalization of the logic of the carceral economy to a principal of municipal governance: the transformation of the ghetto in the image of the penitentiary, the extraction of white income from a Black population already relegated to the margin of society. Put another way, it represents the vertical integration of “the possessive investment in whiteness”: the repurposing of the human by-products of previous rounds of extractions.

Cantoned according to the laws and practices of a white-supremacist real estate market, the Black inhabitants of Ferguson are rendered available for a final round of resource extraction that in many cases threatens to dispossess them entirely, as excessive fines, exclusion from necessary social services, and exclusion from public housing combine to turn them out onto the streets. The murder of the jaywalking Michael Brown was an acute example of the chronic exploitation, harassment, debt-bondage, and wanton bankrupting of the city of Ferguson’s African American population. As James Baldwin memorably put it about the United States in general, “it is extremely expensive to be poor” in Ferguson.³³

The Department of Justice traced all this back to a lack of training, supervision, and oversight, exacerbated by shoddy record keeping and clear racial bias. It documents the *systemic* racism of the Ferguson Police Department. It is a document that is almost unprecedented in its critical attention to racist police practice in the United States. As such, it raises what has long been the common-sense understanding of police in poor and African American communities across the country, and raises it to a principle of public policy. But the report stops short of providing a *structural* analysis of racist policing in Ferguson. Put simply, to begin with: How can the city government be reverting to medieval modes of revenue extraction at the same time that Emerson Electric is doing \$24 billion a year of business out of its Ferguson headquarters? Or, to put the question in terms that lead us from the intentions of racist police officers and city fathers backward toward the incentives that structure the choices they

make—the choice to raise revenue by writing thousands of tickets, the choice to pull over this Black motorist rather than that white motorist, the choice to stop a Black teen for wearing his pants too low or having his hood up or walking down the middle of the street, the choice to shoot him dead after he has run away, the choice to leave his body lying on the putrid street for four hours in the summer heat—what larger interests are expressed in (and exposed by) the actions of racist cops? What can we learn about racism and white supremacy by paying attention to the history—the material, structural ways in which past practices are carried forward into the present—evident as we walk down West Florissant Avenue?

In Ferguson, the answer lies in a historical amalgam of the “possessive investment in whiteness,” corporate privilege, fiscal conservatism, and misguided efforts to use “economic development” to promote social equality. Again, Ferguson, Saint Louis County, and Missouri are not so much unique as they are extreme: they provide an exemplary account of the way that state and local governments think about “economic development” (and even social equality) and the way that corporations do business in the United States of America today.

Thanks to what is known as the “Hancock Amendment,” municipal tax revenue in the state of Missouri is limited by the state constitution: with a very few exceptions, which we will very shortly discuss, any increase of local taxes, licenses, or fees must be approved by a city-wide referendum. This constitutional limitation dates to 1980, the inaugural date of the Reagan Revolution and the high-water mark of Missouri’s own variant of state-shrinking fiscal conservatism as represented by Representative Mel Hancock and his Taxpayer Survival Association. The mixture of melodrama, self-pity, and entitlement suggested by the organization’s title reflects its roots in the broad-based social movement that emerged in the late 1970s to defend the white caste privilege that had been carefully built over the previous half-century. Along with gun licenses, which are explicitly exempted from the provisions of the Hancock Amendment, municipal fines provide Missouri cities with one of the few sources of revenue they can expand without a referendum. This amendment (like similar laws in other states) radically constrains the possibilities of municipal governance in much of the United States of America. Unable to raise taxes, municipal governments have only one tool at their disposal: lowering taxes. Unable to raise money, municipal governments can still give it away.

Take Emerson Electric. On July 27, 2009, Emerson opened a brand-new \$50 million flagship data center on its Ferguson campus. Subsequent press reports about the data center were filled with numbers: 100 dignitaries at the ribbon cutting, including Missouri Governor Jay Nixon; 35,000 square feet; 550 solar panels; \$100,000 in annual energy savings for the company; the ability to withstand an 8.0-magnitude earthquake. They noted how many people Emerson employed globally, nationally, and in the Saint Louis metropolitan area, although

the number of people who might eventually be employed in the new data center itself was hard to find.

In fact, a state-of-the-art data center might eventually employ about two dozen people, none of whom were guaranteed to live in (or anywhere near) Ferguson. The economic function of a data center, after all, is to eliminate clerical workers, not to provide them with jobs, and many of its operations can be performed remotely. (Just as the economic function of an eight-lane expressway is to allow employees from one community to work in another.) But the most remarkable missing number of all was the amount of property tax revenue that the county and city housing this state-of-the-art building would gain from its construction.

In 2014, the assessed valuation of real and personal property on Emerson’s entire 152-acre, seven-building campus was roughly \$15 million. That value has gone up and down over the last five years as Emerson has sold off some buildings and built others, but it has not exceeded \$15 million in the period since the data center was completed. So what happened to that brand-new \$50 million building?³⁴

One explanation would be if Emerson had received a Chapter 353 “local real property tax abatement” to support the construction of the building. For the past fifty years, the Saint Louis area has been using these abatements to encourage new development in areas it designates as Enhanced Enterprise Zones. Companies that bring new development there get certain tax incentives. One of these incentives, according to the state, is a ten-year real estate tax abatement. That means a \$50 million data center built in one of these zones would be allowed to remain all-but-invisible for tax purposes during the first decade of its existence; for the next fifteen years after that, its appraisal value would be halved. Indeed, in 2008, the Saint Louis Economic Development Partnership announced that the data center was being built within a state-designated Enhanced Enterprise Zone, and Emerson has received state tax abatements that are limited to corporations receiving local property tax abatements.³⁵

Emerson, however, steadfastly denies that it received tax abatements to support the center’s construction: company spokesman Mark Polzin claims, “None of our campus real estate is under abatement.” According to Polzin, Emerson has foregone tax abatements for which it is eligible out of a concern for fairness. “We never availed ourselves of such. . . . We felt that our real property had already been being fairly assessed historically by St. Louis County.” In fact, Emerson maintains that the company is voluntarily paying more than required by law.³⁶

It might seem improbable that a corporation—particularly a corporation with as richly documented a history of hostility to taxes as Emerson—would refuse any tax break to which it was legally entitled. Polzin’s explanation, however, is both plausible and fascinating: Emerson did not need the abatement because its

taxes were already low enough. At the very least, this raises important questions about the assessment value of property in Saint Louis County: about, put another way, the structural aspect of the political economy of Ferguson, Missouri.

For tax purposes, Emerson's Ferguson campus is appraised according to its "fair market value." That means a \$50 million solar-powered data center is only worth what another firm would be willing to pay for it. "Our location in Ferguson affects the fair market value of the entire campus," Polzin explained.³⁷ By that reasoning, the condition of West Florissant Avenue explains the low valuation of the company's headquarters. The extraordinary fact that the assessed value of the improvements on Emerson's property somehow declined by almost one-third (from just under \$7.5 million to just over \$4.5 million) between 2014 and 2015 is apparently to be blamed on Michael Brown rather than any shifty corporate legerdemain in the accounting office or cozy dealings with the county tax assessor.

Of course, the opposite is true: the rock-bottom assessment value of the Ferguson campus helps ensure that West Florissant Avenue remains in its current condition, year after year. It severely limits the tax money Emerson contributes to the Ferguson-Florissant district's struggling schools. (Michael Brown graduated from nearby Normandy High School, a nearly 100 percent African American school that would have been supported by the property taxes on Express Scripts' multimillion-dollar corporate headquarters if, that is, Express Scripts paid any property taxes at all; I have not been able to find a record to suggest that it does.) It likewise limited the taxes Emerson pays to the government of Saint Louis County more generally. On the twenty-five parcels Emerson owns all around Saint Louis County, it pays the county \$1.3 million in property taxes. Ferguson itself receives far less. Even after a 2013 property tax increase (from \$0.65 to the state-maximum \$1 per \$100 of assessed value), Ferguson received an estimated \$68,000 in property taxes from the corporate headquarters that occupies 152 acres of its tax base—not even enough to pay the municipal judge and clerk to hand out the fines and sign the arrest warrants.³⁸

Saint Louis County does not just assess Emerson a low market value. It then divides that number in three—so its final property value, for tax purposes, ends up being one-third of its already low appraised value. In some states, a town such as Ferguson would be able to offset this write-down by raising its own percentage tax rate. Voters would even be able to decide which services needed the most help and raise property taxes for specific reasons. But Missouri sets a limit for such levies: \$1 per \$100 of property. As Joseph Pulitzer wrote of Saint Louis during the first Gilded Age, "Millions and millions of property in this city escape all taxation."³⁹

Emerson Electric is not the only business on Ferguson's West Florissant Avenue. The street is also home to a number of big box stores including a Home Depot, a Walmart, and a Sam's Club, located at the city's northern limit. These

companies all came to town in 1997 through something called tax increment financing—known (to the extent it is known at all) by the acronym TIF. Along with low appraisals and tax abatements, TIF districts are one of Missouri’s principal tools for encouraging new development.⁴⁰

It works like this: a community like Ferguson wants to bring more money into its economy and increase its property values. So it designates a TIF district and borrows money by selling municipal bonds. Those funds are most often used to make the area more attractive to businesses—clearing old buildings, adding roads, upgrading infrastructure. All of this is based on the assumption that the new commercial development will bring a certain amount of revenue—in the form of rising property values on adjacent parcels, increased revenue from sales taxes, and so forth. That revenue will be used to retire the bonds that funded the TIF.

In theory, these incentives do not cost taxpayers any money. Cities issue these bonds feeling confident that the new businesses will generate more than enough revenue to pay the money back. The problem is that the amount the city must pay each year is locked in at the beginning of the bond issue. If the increased revenue is not as high as expected in any given year, the city finds itself in the red. Tax Increment Financing is a way of indenturing municipalities to their own hypothetical economic development.

Actually, it is even worse than that. The municipal bonds issued by cities like Ferguson are bundled and sold on a secondary market, in much the same way as the bundled subprime mortgages that figured so prominently in the financial crisis of 2008. The purchasers of these bonds then become, in effect, the creditors of the cities that have issued them. Municipal bonds are generally a good investment for those who buy them. Under federal law, the interest they pay their holders is tax-exempt. Not only that, municipal bond holders have the legal status of first-paid creditors: before a struggling city fixes its roads, or pays for the new park or the school on Main Street, it is legally obligated to pay the investors on Wall Street.

Like any other municipal bond, TIF bonds are ultimately secured by the ability of the issuer to raise revenue: in this case, by Ferguson’s ability to tax its citizens in order to pay off the bonds it has issued. If the revenue falls short of projections, the debt has to be covered by local citizens: not by the banks, which are insulated because they have not loaned money directly to the underperforming retailers, and not by the retailers, which are protected because the city has paid for the capital improvements of the area, limiting their sunk-cost investment in the area. It is the taxpayers (and fine payers) who have to make up the difference. In Ferguson, that is precisely what happened.

The Halls Ferry TIF in Ferguson—the one that was used to underwrite the construction of the big box stores on West Florissant Avenue—was originally valued at \$8 million. Over the past several years, however, the revenue generated

by the TIF district has not been sufficient to cover the bond. The TIF-specific deficits—\$43,000 in 2012—had to be covered with taxpayer money.⁴¹

Not all TIFs fail to match projections. As it happens, there is also a successful TIF in Ferguson. Unfortunately, it demonstrates the ultimate emptiness of the repeated promise that the rising tide would lift all boats. The South Florissant TIF was initiated in 2012 to build multi-use retail and residential space in Ferguson’s downtown area. If it has not been entirely successful in the planning document’s stated goal of establishing Ferguson as a “regional destination,” along the lines of the Delmar Loop shopping and restaurant district, it has nevertheless supported the emergence of the sort of photo-ready pleasantness illustrated in the planning documents.⁴² And it is in the black.

So: what’s not to like? Ferguson’s South Florissant TIF was self-consciously designed to provide a front door for the city’s subsequent economic development—but not to improve life for existing residents. Its proponents envisioned an artery of retail and residential development that would connect the city (as well as the City of Cool Valley, which was also involved in the planning) to the campus of the University of Missouri–Saint Louis and to the industrial development sprawling along I-70. The planning document mentioned that the new district would open downtown Ferguson to the employees of UMSL, Express Scripts, and Emerson. But that document never addressed the disconnection of South Florissant from West Florissant Avenue.

To get from the neighborhood where Michael Brown died to downtown Ferguson, one has to travel a long, undeveloped stretch of Ferguson Avenue and then make a near-180-degree turn under a railroad bridge to merge onto another street that leads to the downtown. There are no sidewalks bordering this stretch of road, and many of those who travel it do so by walking on the shoulder—a notable issue given the risk of being cited for “manner of walking in the roadway” faced by Black pedestrians in Ferguson. The “two Fergusons” mentioned by many commentators are effectively connected by a back door.

All of this inverts the whole purpose of funding economic development through taxpayer dollars. Under Missouri laws, TIF district plans are limited to areas that have been designated “blighted” by that municipality. They were designed to bring the benefits of capitalist development to areas that would otherwise be regarded as inhospitable to investment. Along with Chapter 353 tax abatements, which have a similarly framed focus on “blighted” areas, TIF bonds were designed to use the market economy to push forward the not-yet-realized project of racial equality in the United States.⁴³ In the event, however, these tools have often been turned inside out: used to generalize the risk of investment to the entire population of a city while concentrating their financial benefits in small tracts of development.

The final twist in the story is an extraordinary one. Under the Hancock Amendment, municipalities can raise their *sales* tax without a local referendum

in order to pay for the retirement of TIF bonds. According to the Ferguson city budget, sales taxes account for the largest share of the city’s revenues; next come municipal court fines, and after that, franchise taxes—taxes on telecommunications, natural gas, and electricity usage. Only after all that comes revenue from property taxes.⁴⁴ This means Ferguson extracts more revenue from African American renters seeking to heat their homes in the winter, light them after dark, and talk on their cell phones than it does from those who own the homes themselves. Taken together, these regressive taxes account for almost 60 percent of the city’s revenue. In contrast, property taxes—which are, at least in theory, progressive taxes—account for just under 12 percent. The vast wealth of Ferguson, scarcely taxed at all, is locked up in property that African Americans were prevented from buying for most of the city’s history.

The solution to the mystery of Emerson’s missing \$50 million building turns out to be hidden in plain sight, at the intersection of “limited government” and “economic development.” Municipalities in the United States operate under extraordinary constraints: under the laws of most states, their ability to raise revenue is limited, and they have correspondingly few tools to try to improve the lives of their citizens. One tool they do have is tax abatement. Rather than raising money, cities can give it away. These efforts are almost always framed by an ideology of economic development: by the idea that bringing new businesses into a community will automatically make that community a better place to live for all of its citizens. This ideology is so familiar—so commonsensical—that it is subject to only the barest of tests in order to be reaffirmed as the governing standard: is the city of Ferguson better off with Emerson than it would be without it?

That familiar formulation has the rhetorical shape of a question about governance—do tax abatements serve the citizenry?—but it turns out to be almost totally devoid of actual meaning. Would Emerson really abandon its seven-building, 150-acre campus if the state, county, and city government forced it to pay more taxes? Are there really only two choices here: better off with or without Emerson? Or is there a fuller way to imagine the contribution of a \$24 billion business to its corporate home than the presence or absence of \$55,000 of local taxes? Can we imagine a version of “economic development” that goes beyond the model of providing absurd levels of municipal subsidy to corporations that contribute only tiny increments of their profits to the communities they abut?

“Economic development” in the United States of America turns out to have the bare meaning of “getting large businesses to locate their buildings within the city limits.” In Saint Louis County, this race to the bottom is turbo-charged by the postage-stamp pattern of municipal governance left over from the era of suburban segregationism, which makes it easy for businesses to pit municipalities against one another by threatening short-haul moves in search of the best possible deal. What does Walmart have to lose by moving four hundred yards down the road to a brand new TIF district one town over?⁴⁵

These factors—the drastic underassessment of corporate wealth, the indenture of municipal government to corporate development, the unequal allocation of risk and benefit between municipalities and the improvement districts they contain—are not unique to Ferguson. The legal constraints, the “development” tools they have spawned, and the negative consequences of their over-misapplication exist in many other cities in the United States: that is why I refer to them as aspects of the history of “structural” rather than “intentional” racism. They are the product of misaligned incentives and priorities that characterize any effort to achieve social benefits through economic “development.” The historical patterns of white privilege and Black disadvantage, of residential segregation and police harassment, of municipal fealty and corporate subsidy are old enough, deep enough, and entrenched enough to frame the actions of even the most well-meaning officials. History and the standing order have left those who seek to govern US cities with only bad choices.

To say that the recent history of Ferguson exemplifies the history of structural racism or the enhancement and defense of the “possessive investment in whiteness” is not necessarily to say that the Ferguson city government has been especially craven, characterized by poor decision making or a high degree of self-dealing. As it happens, however, the Ferguson city government *has* been especially craven, characterized by poor decision making, and a high degree of self-dealing. Faced with only bad choices, the Ferguson city government has repeatedly made disgraceful ones.

The Ferguson city budget for FY 2013–2014 opens with a cautious note. The city, it comments, has not “recovered” from the loss of \$1.5 million annually in tax revenue dating back to the financial crisis, which began in Saint Louis County in 2006. Or, in a more Biblical mode: “The economic turbulence visited upon the city . . . has been unparalleled in recent memory.”⁴⁶ And yet, the government of the city of Ferguson has chosen to respond with a campaign of unparalleled spending on the government of the city of Ferguson. In the last two years, the city of Ferguson has built a new \$8 million fire station, issued bonds to fund the portion of the \$3.5 million renovation of the police station not being funded by the South Florissant TIF, and given all municipal employees (almost one-half of whom work for the police department) an 8 percent raise.⁴⁷

The city’s FY 2013–2014 budget also earmarked a half-million dollars for the replacement of all of the city’s marked police cars with brand-new Chevrolet Tahoes, presumably including the one that Officer Darren Wilson was driving when he confronted Michael Brown and then shot him with one of the sixty brand-new handguns the city purchased in 2014.⁴⁸

So much spending on the infrastructure of municipal governance might be appropriate in a city that was running a budget surplus, but, as we have seen, the city of Ferguson has been relying on municipal traffic fines to close the gap between its growing expenditures and its declining revenue. In addition to the

continued farming of the population for revenue through municipal fines, however, *the city of Ferguson has been using almost a million dollars a year from its designated Parks Fund to cover bond payments and operating expenses.*⁴⁹ Like some kind of junkie using his (kids’) lunch money to fund a bad habit, the city of Ferguson has been raiding its parks to fund the overdevelopment of its police and fire departments.

In a final twist, it turns out that the city of Ferguson has been using its South Florissant TIF bond to fund the renovation of the Ferguson police department and expansion of the municipal court complex. Now the police station and the court complex may be downtown, but they do not generate revenue, at least of the sort that is earmarked for the repayment of the TIF bond. (Of course, if one counts the \$2.6 million in municipal tickets issued from those buildings last year, they have already paid for themselves.) The city is using the structure of the TIF bond to move the renovations of the police department and the courts building to the front of the municipal queue. Rather than using money that has been borrowed on security provided by all of the citizens of Ferguson to double-down on its prize-pig police department, the city might have tried to use its TIF funds to link the downtown area to the rest of the city. Perhaps they could have even built a sidewalk alongside Ferguson Avenue—after all, as Officer Wilson surely reminded Michael Brown shortly before shooting him, jaywalking is illegal in Ferguson.

“Fuck the Police”: Presence of Mind

So far, I have attempted to place the recent history of Ferguson in the wider context of structural racism and the “possessive investment in whiteness”: racially selective federal subsidies in the form of home loans and highway development; the development and defense of racially exclusive suburbs and of segregated neighborhoods as a well-understood aspect of the equity that white homeowners hold in their houses; the violent extraction of white privilege through the criminal justice system and the carceral economy, and, in particular, the revenue-farming, corporation-subsidizing police harassment that provides the most immediate context of the long history that played out on Canfield Drive early in the afternoon of August 9, 2014.

In closing, I want to return to the notion of “presence of mind” with which I began. There was nothing unique or exceptional about what Darren Wilson did to Michael Brown: he did what hundreds of police officers in the United States do every year: he murdered a young Black man. What was exceptional is what happened next: the outrage on Canfield Drive grew into a national and international movement. The Saint Louis hip-hop artist and activist Tef Poe (Kareem Jackson) is one of the faces of that movement, and his story exemplifies what I have been calling “presence of mind,” the sort of on-the-fly, as-yet-untheorized response to a

moment in time that Benjamin wrote of in “One-Way Street”—direct action that both diagnoses an understanding of the past-conditioned character of the present and encodes a premonitory effort to point the way toward a better future.⁵⁰ The uncanny sensation Tef Poe remembers having as a teenager on the corner of Chambers and West Florissant: this is not right, something is going to happen.⁵¹

When Poe went to Canfield Drive on the afternoon of August 9, he did so out of an admixture of curiosity, solidarity, and outrage: he had heard on social media that the police had shot someone and the body was lying in the street.⁵² A series of outrages followed from that one: someone tried to unceremoniously load the body into the back of a black SUV; a police dog urinated on rose petals that had been scattered by Michael Brown’s mother; a police officer roughed up one of Brown’s uncles who was trying to find out when the body would be removed. Four hours passed. Then someone Poe describes as a white hippie dragging a boom box in a wagon walked by, playing Lil’ Boosie’s “Fuck the Police” at high volume, and the crowd started to become confrontational.⁵³

The process by which that confrontation grew into a global social movement is unfathomably complex, but I want to highlight the ways in which Poe tells stories about the movement that move from his experience in Saint Louis in the summer of 2014 outward into the world and the future. Poe’s accounts of his participation in “the Michael Brown Rebellion” usually begin on West Florissant Avenue. They are stories about confronting the police and the national guard; about “loyalty” to the people who stood with him on the “front line”; about actions taken on the basis of fundamental premises rather than fully theorized imagined outcomes: “Fuck the Police,” “Black Lives Matter.” Out of these confrontations grew solidarities, what Poe would call “loyalties.” With queer politics: “I have seen white gay men stand up beside me when we were getting guns pointed at us”; “Trans and gay people exist. I can’t disown the people that had my back when I had nothing to please you.” With Palestine: on “that first night, it was a woman from Palestine who taught us how to make gas masks out of plastic bottles.”⁵⁴ And out of those practical solidarities in a moment of time came an open-ended commitment to a life in the struggle (“I will turn myself into a tool that will influence society in ways I am yet to imagine. I will live, I will grow, and above all—St. Louis, Missouri I will not allow you to kill me”), a trip to the Occupied Territories and the Ferguson–Palestine solidarity movement, and a commitment to fighting patriarchy and homophobia along with white supremacy.⁵⁵

Poe is famous for saying things like “This is not your father’s civil rights movement.”⁵⁶ Like many of the young people who had been organizing and sustaining months of protest in Saint Louis—getting people to turn out day after day after day as the weather turned cold and the city awaited the grand jury verdict—he deeply resented Oprah Winfrey’s well-publicized suggestion that the movement that began in Ferguson lacked “leadership” in comparison to the movement depicted in the 2015 film *Selma*. Like many others in Saint Louis,

he has engaged in an increasingly public feud with the Reverend Al Sharpton, who is viewed by many of those who protested on West Florissant Avenue as a drop-in opportunist who wants to conscript their efforts to his own agenda.⁵⁷

And yet Poe has a tattoo of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on his arm. His critique of the Civil Rights movement and its self-appointed guardians is institutional (“They want to take everything over, and have everything go through them”) rather than historical.⁵⁸ His mentors, his models, and even his “heroes” are the nonaligned elders of the struggle for racial justice in Saint Louis and elsewhere: Percy Green, who chained himself to the unfinished Saint Louis arch in July of 1964 to demand construction jobs for Black workers; Ivory Perry, who sat down in the middle of Interstate 40 to protest “slum” clearance and urban redevelopment, and chained himself to the doors of the Laclede Gas Company to demand jobs in 1965; and Elaine Brown, the leader of the Black Panther Party in the mid-1970s, who fought patriarchy within the Panthers and worked to establish Black-directed social programs in the Panthers’ home city, Oakland, California. Indeed, Hands Up United, an organization Poe cofounded in the autumn of 2014, has a Ten-Point Program reminiscent of the Panthers, including a Freedom School for adults, a Breakfast and Books program for children and adults, and software engineering classes for teens.⁵⁹

This is a vision born of “presence of mind,” of the volatile combination of activist—one might even say revolutionary—practice and historical self-consciousness on West Florissant Avenue: the assertion of a standard of justice, community self-government, and global solidarity that outline a reach well beyond what had theretofore passed for “electoral democracy” in Ferguson, and a vision of social transformation made by people who were not a self-conscious vanguard.⁶⁰ It is also, notably, a vision of justice and right that reaches well beyond the focus on the racist actions of the police that has properly—necessarily—but incompletely become the center of the national discussion of what happened in Ferguson. What Poe calls the Michael Brown Rebellion may have begun with “Fuck the Police,” but out of that confrontation on West Florissant it has grown and expanded to programs, solidarities, and aspirations greatly in excess of the police-focused solutions being proposed by the left-of-center mainstream: beyond the Reverend Al Sharpton’s diagnoses of the problem as the actions of a few “bad-apple” cops who might spoil the whole bushel; beyond body cameras and civilian review boards; beyond even the much-needed investigation of the corrupt practices of the Ferguson police department (as well as of many of the other departments in Saint Louis County).⁶¹

Epilogue: The View from 8000 W. Florissant Avenue

On September 18, 2014, Emerson Electric, perhaps worried that someone would finally notice its corporate headquarters looming above West Florissant Avenue,

announced Ferguson Forward, a program of support for early childhood education, jobs for young people, college scholarships for students from surrounding high schools to study engineering at the University of Missouri—Saint Louis, and outreach to North County entrepreneurs in need of advice about business plans, accounting practices, and, presumably, corporate tax avoidance and local tax abatements.⁶²

Philosophically, Ferguson Forward represents the notion that philanthropy and “talent identification” is a more appropriate form of corporate responsibility than paying taxes to support failing schools (*all* of the schools in the region of Saint Louis County where Michael Brown grew up have been declared “failed schools” by the state or Missouri or are perilously close to being so).⁶³ It restages the long-running (and racist) distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor as what Chandan Reddy has called “the dialectic of exceptionality and disposability,” as a question of which small number of students can fight through underfunded and failing schools in order to win a scholarship at the end of the race.⁶⁴

Practically speaking, it represents a recommitment to some existing programs, a tacit reliance on the continuation of segregated schooling in Saint Louis County to ensure that the graduates of the targeted high schools are students of the sorts the proposal is designed to aid. It is a reconstruction of the events in Ferguson that assumes the problem begins in the Black community, which needs to be better educated and employed, rather than with the longer history of segregation, white privilege, and abusive policing in the metropolitan area. It responds to the unrest in Ferguson without addressing the causes of that unrest.

Why not fund the demilitarization of Saint Louis County, for example? Or pay off the outstanding municipal fines of all of the residents of Ferguson, or fund the construction of affordable multiunit housing in Crestwood, the 95 percent white West County suburb from which Darren Wilson drove into work in Ferguson? Why not buy property along West Florissant Avenue from the real estate holding companies that own it and make it available on favorable terms to locally owned businesses? Most suggestively, from the perspective I have taken here, Emerson’s announcement of the Ferguson Forward program concluded with the announcement of a \$25 million, fifteen-thousand-square-foot addition to the company’s Ferguson campus. Why not simply announce that Emerson Electric will encourage Saint Louis County to reassess all of its property in the county with a view to redressing the structural privilege from which it has benefited for the past century and a quarter? Why not just bring some of the eyewitnesses to history who organized the protests in front of the Ferguson police station onto the company’s gated campus, and allow them to advise what Emerson should do with its money?

The fact that these proposals seem self-evidently absurd provides one measure of the extent to which the common sense of our unjust world has di-

minished our collective notion of the possible: the way that the history of “the possessive investment in whiteness” has succeeded in shrinking our future to its own pusillanimous measure. The thing about common sense is that it changes slowly. Common sense is like the riverbank of history, limiting the range of its possibility, incising its direction. As with the Mississippi River against which the city lies, in Saint Louis, these riverbanks have been reinforced and the flow channeled with millions and millions of dollars of public money.

But there are always eddies and overflows: the history-shored limits of the possible change slowly, but change they do. Ferguson has become a byword for police harassment and excessive force, for predatory municipal government and state-sponsored segregation, for the injustice and outrage that lie beneath the surface of the not-yet history of US freedom. The common sense of the disenfranchised has become the substance of national news, the substrate of an emergent understanding of the relationship between past, present, and future. The uprising in Ferguson, the outrage and direct action of people in the streets, has provided us with the opportunity to see our times anew.⁶⁵ It is up to us to have the presence of mind to seize the moment.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 97–99. I first encountered Madame Ariane in the introduction to George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). That introduction is the least of the debts that this essay owes to Lipsitz.

2. Ibid.

3. Emerson, “Emerson Reports Third Quarter 2014 Results,” August 4, 2014, <http://www.emerson.com/en-us/News/Pages/Emerson-Reports-Q3Y14-Results.aspx>.

4. This was one of the first images to come out of Ferguson, before the uprising. The photo may be found in many media accounts of the event, including Tanay Hudson, “Police May Charge Mike Brown’s Stepfather with Inciting a Riot,” All HipHop, December 2, 2014, <http://allhiphop.com/2014/12/03/mike-brown-stepdad-inciting-riot/>.

5. Statement of Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Iraq before a Joint Hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee of Armed Services, September 10, 2007, posted as “Full Text: Petraeus and Crocker Testimony,” Politico, September 10, 2007, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0907/5735.html>.

6. Heidi Hoechst, *Life in and against the Odds: Debts of Freedom and the Speculative Roots of U.S. Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015); Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 245–268.

7. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2014), 193–224.

8. Ibid., 111–148.

9. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 5.

10. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.

11. Quoted in Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37.

12. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 1–23. See also Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); Robert O. Self,

American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

13. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 37.

14. On “racial capitalism,” see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9–28, 101–120.

15. Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment and Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95–133; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

16. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012), 265.

17. Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis”; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

18. See the website of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association at <http://www.ccpoa.org/>.

19. Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 74–77; Dennis R. Judd, “Promoting Residential Segregation in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area,” *Journal of Negro Education* 66, no. 3 (1997): 215.

20. Charles Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008); Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 69–87.

21. Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 88–111; Perry quoted in George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 212. See also Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936–75* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

22. Gordon, *Mapping Decline*, 112–153; see also Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*.

23. Gary Orfield, “Residential Segregation: What Are the Causes?,” *Journal of Negro Education* 66, no. 3 (1997): 205; Judd, “Promoting Residential Segregation,” 216–217.

24. Judd, “Promoting Residential Segregation,” 232.

25. *Ibid.*, 220.

26. Arch City Defenders, “Municipal Courts White Paper,” 12, <http://www.archcitydefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ArchCity-Defenders-Municipal-Courts-Whitepaper.pdf>.

27. Radley Balko, “How Municipalities in St. Louis County, Mo. Profit from Poverty,” *Washington Post*, September 3, 2014.

28. Arch City Defenders, “Municipal Courts White Paper,” 31.

29. Arch City Defenders, “Municipal Courts White Paper,” 7.

30. United States Department of Justice, “Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department,” March 4, 2015, http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.

31. Frances Robles, “Ferguson Sets Broad Changes for City Courts,” *New York Times*, September 8, 2014.

32. Arch City Defenders, “Municipal Courts White Paper,” 16–17.

33. James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem,” in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press, 1961).

34. St. Louis County Assessor, St. Louis County Parcel Viewer, <http://maps.stlouisco.com/propertyview/> (Emerson Electric’s Ferguson Campus is tract 12H320060; Emerson’s personal property taxes are coded with the identifier).

35. Missouri Department of Economic Development, “Chapter 353 Tax Abatement,” http://www.ded.mo.gov/BCS_Programs/BCSProgramDetails.aspx?BCSProgramID=6; Missouri Department of Economic Development, “Enhanced Enterprise Zone,” http://www.ded.mo.gov/BCS_Programs/BCSProgramDetails.aspx?BCSProgramID=39.

36. Personal communication, email from Emerson spokesman Mark Polzin to Walter Johnson, March 30, 2015.

37. Personal communication, email from Emerson spokesman Mark Polzin to Walter Johnson, March 30, 2015.

38. St. Louis County Assessor, St. Louis County Parcel Viewer, <http://maps.stlouisco.com/propertyview/> (Emerson Electric’s Ferguson Campus is tract 12H320060; Emerson’s personal property taxes are coded with the identifier); personal communication, email from Emerson spokesman Mark Polzin to Walter Johnson, March 30, 2015; Arch City Defenders, “Municipal Courts White Paper,” 32. The city does not publicly report Judge Ronald C. Brockmeyer’s salary, but the budget for thirty-six sessions of court staffed by three full-time and three part-time employees is \$318,300.

39. Quoted in James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri* (Saint Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press), 357.

40. I am indebted to Sarah Coffin at St. Louis University’s Center for Sustainability for helping me understand tax increment financing and answering many elementary questions about a field in which she has long been doing advanced work.

41. City of Ferguson (Missouri), Annual Operating Budget for 2013–2014 (accessible at the city’s website, <http://www.fergusoncity.com/documentcenter/view/1604>), 40, 102.

42. ULI St. Louis Technical Assistance Panel Recommendations Florissant Road Corridor, City of Ferguson, Saint Louis, Missouri, <http://www.fergusoncity.com/documentcenter/view/1087>, 3.

43. In the absence of any carefully thought-through notion of what constitutes “blight” or of any social benchmarks that companies or municipalities might be asked to meet in order to show that their “development” was addressing it, the legal standard for determining eligibility for a Chapter 353 tax abatement or TIF financing is another time-toggling, meaning-annihilating piece of corporate-underwriting legal language: the “but for” clause. In order to demonstrate a condition of “blight” sufficient to qualify for special support, a corporation must demonstrate to a municipality that “but for” tax abatements or TIF financing, it would not be possible to locate the project on the proposed site. The “but for” standard resolves the question of the public subsidy of private economic development to a plane of determination that is, on the one hand, essentially unknowable (what might not otherwise happen) and on the other, tautologically obvious (if the condition of locating the project on a given site is that the surrounding area be labeled “blighted,” then the project will not be located on that site unless the surrounding area is labeled “blighted”). About the only silver lining here is that so much of Saint Louis County has by now been labeled “blighted” in a collective corporate effort to feed at this particular sales tax- and traffic ticket-financed trough that the designation cannot be used by private bankers looking to redline minority borrowers.

44. City of Ferguson, Annual Operating Budget for 2013–2014, 11.

45. I am particularly grateful to Gerald Frug for helping me think through the limitations of this common-sense notion of “economic development.”

46. City of Ferguson, Annual Operating Budget for 2013–2014, i, 24.

47. *Ibid.*, 25, CIP-24, vi, 13. The raises were 2 percent in FY 2012–2013 and 6 percent in FY 2013–2014—slightly over 8 percent over the course of the two years.

48. *Ibid.*, CIP-10. This is in addition to the fantastic array of federal-surplus military hardware deployed on West Florissant Avenue in the aftermath of the shooting to “keep the peace.”

49. *Ibid.*, 87, 110. Parks are funded by sales tax revenue legally designated for that purpose. The city has budgeted between \$250,000 and \$500,000 a year from this designated Parks Fund to actually spend on the parks, an amount that was enhanced last year by a pair of one-time grants from Saint Louis County.

50. See also C. L. R. James, *American Civilization* (London: Blackwell, 1993) and *Notes on Dialectics* (London: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1981).

51. See Poe’s contributions to “Generations of Struggle” in this issue of *Kalfou*.

52. Tef Poe, “Ferguson and Hip Hop Activism: Game On,” Charles Warren Center/Hip Hop Archive and Research Center, Harvard University, December 9, 2014, <http://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/ferguson-and-hiphop-activism-game>.

53. Tef Poe, interview with Walter Johnson, December 9, 2014.

54. Poe, “Ferguson and Hip Hop Activism.”

55. Tef Poe, interview with Walter Johnson, December 3, 2015. On the history of Black Radical engagement with Palestine, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “Yes, I said ‘National Liberation,’” in Vijay Prashad, ed., *Letters to Palestine* (New York: Verso, 2015). See also a statement Poe made on his public Facebook page on February 11, 2015: “I’m not in a masculinity race with none of you fools. . . . Nah man not on my watch any form of an African person is my peoples. . . . Live your life and let other people live theirs. Anything other than this is a very high-horse patriarchal standard . . . coming from both men and women. . . . I don’t care who you are.”

56. See Poe’s discussion of this statement in “Generations of Struggle” in this issue of *Kalfou*.

57. Eli Saslow, “The Public Life and Private Doubts of Al Sharpton,” *Washington Post*, February 7, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/02/07/the-public-life-and-private-doubts-of-al-sharpton/>.

58. Tef Poe, interview with Walter Johnson, December 3, 2015.

59. See the organization’s webpage, Hands Up United, at <http://www.handsupunited.org/>.

60. For my terms here, see James, *American Civilization*; James, *Notes on Dialectics*.

61. For the text of Sharpton’s sermon at Michael Brown’s funeral, see Black America Web, “Thousands Attend Michael Brown Funeral in Ferguson,” August 25, 2014, <http://blackamericaweb.com/2014/08/25/thousands-attend-michael-brown-funeral-in-ferguson/2>; Steve Benen, “Twelve Percent Is an Insult to Your Children,” MSNBC, August 18, 2014, <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/twelve-percent-turnout-insult-your-children>; see also Charles Cobb, “Ferguson: Forgotten Lessons of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2014. Sharpton, who termed low voting rates in Ferguson “an insult to your children,” apparently did not stop to consider the substantial barrier to voter registration posed by the twelve thousand outstanding warrants waiting to be served at the Ferguson courthouse.

62. They did not need to worry. Emerson’s invisibility was confirmed on the morning of November 25, 2014. After a night in which the police and National Guard had dispersed protestors on South Florissant Avenue with tear gas while maintaining no presence whatsoever on West Florissant Avenue, Chris Cuomo and Don Lemon took to the air on CNN to condemn those who burned buildings on West Florissant during the night. “This community needs businesses,” they gravely intoned, suggesting that the destruction of revenue-producing institutions in an impoverished community represented a particularly bone-headed sort of depravity. As they spoke, Cuomo and Lemon were standing in the parking lot of the Buzz Westfall Shopping Center, staring across the street at Emerson Electric, which obviously escaped their notice (Legal View with Ashleigh Banfield, aired November 25, 2014, CNN). The matrix of racism and real estate in Saint Louis County has led Tef Poe, along with many others, to conclude that Prosecutor Robert McCulloch colluded with Governor Jay Nixon to 1) delay the announcement that Darren Wilson would not be indicted after dark, and 2) leave West Florissant unpoliced in the aftermath of that announcement in order to hasten the area’s “redevelopment” by facilitating its destruction. (For the actually existing 2012 “redevelopment” plan, see City of Ferguson, Missouri, “West Florissant Avenue Corridor Plan,” August 2012, <http://www.fergusoncity.com/documentcenter/view/1442>.) If any readers have a better explanation of either 1 or 2, please let me know. For the information on Ferguson Forward, see Julie Bosman, “Bruised and Weary, Ferguson Struggles to Heal,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2014; Emerson, “Community Giving Fact Sheet Fiscal Year 2013,” http://www.emerson.com/SiteCollectionDocuments/Community%20Giving%20Reports/Emerson-Comm-Giving-Fact-Sheet-2013_Final.pdf; Emerson, “Community Giving 2013,” <http://www.emerson.com/en-us/AboutUs/Pages/community-giving-2013.aspx>.

63. Dale Singer, “Normandy Schools Lose Accreditation,” *St. Louis Beacon*, September 12, 2012, https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/27048/normandy_accreditation_decision_091412.

64. Chandan Reddy, plenary discussion, Anti-racism Inc./Works Anti-conference, May 16, 2014, University of California, Santa Barbara.

65. Bosman, “Bruised and Weary, Ferguson Struggles to Heal”; Emerson, “Community Giving Fact Sheet Fiscal Year 2013”; Emerson, “Community Giving 2013.”