

Understanding the Roots of Inequality: Protestors and the Causes of Ferguson.

Introduction

Long time activists and newly radicalized youth in Ferguson have a tremendous variety of personal and family histories. These histories demonstrate how structural racism has been embedded in the social and political geography of St. Louis for centuries. This project seeks to answer a simple question, “How do local activists within the #BlackLivesMatter movement understand the root causes of the recent events in Ferguson?” The project will use oral histories, content analysis, and participant observation to explore the formulations of this understanding. With a team composed of university and community members, this project will engage a variety of stakeholders from multiple analytical perspectives at the grassroots level. In taking this approach we will supply recordings and transcripts for the university’s archives, and compile that data into articles to be published in scholarly journals and presented at conferences.

Purpose/goals

The purpose of this project is to document what Ferguson protestors understand to be the root causes of St. Louis inequities. With this purpose in mind, we have several aims:

- We seek to gain a more complex understanding of events in Ferguson by documenting the perspectives of movement activists.
- We aim to add nuance to the protestor perspectives by parsing out the ways that different political histories inform individual activist’s understanding of the contemporary moment.
- We aim to explore how the #BlackLivesMatter movement builds on and parts ways with the legacies and histories of previous black liberation movements.
- Broadly, we hope to document the intangible yet critical transformations taking place in the consciousness of politicized St. Louisans’ in this contemporary moment.

We expect these goals will be achieved in part through people’s comments on the range of factors that shape St. Louis’ urban structure and the intersectional identities of activists. Achieving these aims will also help to produce a rich primary source archive, accessible for future researchers. In addition, it will inform conversations on civic and political education by highlighting how particular knowledge inspire or derive from the type of active citizenship that has emerged in St. Louis.

Context and Sustainable Urbanism

While research about the historical process of St. Louis’s urban decay already exists, there is a great need to study how people, especially newly politicized people, understand the formation of our contemporary moment. To this day, scholarship on Black activism in St. Louis cuts off in the 1970s. Historians Clarence Lang (2009) and Kenneth Jolly (2006) used people-centered understandings of structural racism and class disparity to cover the Civil Rights/Black Power Era. Others like Dixon (2014) outline the politics of a new progressive left from the perspectives of people within this community although detached from local landscapes. Numerous other scholars point to the historical and global structural shifts that created today’s urbanism (Harvey 2008, Gordon 2009, Rothstein 2014). Still, despite these conversations on politics of movements and their connections to urbanism, the scholarship on contemporary St. Louis continues to lag. The #BlackLivesMatter movement has opened the ideal opportunity to conduct primary research, and explore how

the idea of “root causes” are being configured among activists at ground zero. Furthermore, the contribution of marginalized people voicing their own connection between their untold histories and their efforts to transform cities is still not fully developed within Black social movement scholarship.

Methods

This study will use ethnography and oral histories as its methodological approach. Participant observation and structured interviews will be the primary means of data collection. This approach is necessary because it focuses on capturing people-centered understandings. This project also seeks to create a dialogical relationship with the movement and its participants by documenting and preserving real-time narratives that can be used to inform future histories. The study will take place from June 2014 through September 2014. The timeframe helps to capture understandings of root causes, as protestors approach and pass the one-year marker of Michael Brown’s death on August 9th. During this period, the researchers will conduct participant observation at various movement meetings and actions and produce field notes. They will also conduct 15-20 interviews with people at various levels of the movement and of different demographic backgrounds.

Limitations

To capture meaning from social movement fieldwork requires flexibility around when and how a researcher enters and exits the particular political community. Since political communities are always in flux, gaining access to them can—at times—be difficult. On the flip side, full access often runs the risk of lacking critical distance from the subject. However, we align with literature on movements that recognizes this distance as unproductive for accessing the analytical richness that happens within movement spaces.

Outcomes

This project will deliver at least one article for scholarly publication, a faculty/student conference panel, and several audio recordings and transcripts for WUSTL Library’s Documenting Ferguson Archive Project. The content of these deliverables will be evaluated by Rudolph Clay, African and African American Studies Research Librarian, and community partners at the midpoint and conclusion of the project.