

Ferguson before #Ferguson

Behind every Michael Brown is a story of structural racism waiting to be told



Half a story Protestors react to tear gas fired by police during protests in Ferguson, August 18, 2014. (*Lucas Jackson / Reuters*)

The idea was to have difficult conversations. It was 2011, and I had sold my bosses at WYPR, Baltimore's NPR station, on a yearlong series about the region's race and class divides. It would air on *Maryland Morning with Sheilah Kast*, the interview program where I served as senior producer. At the time, I felt comparatively well prepared to lead this effort, even though I am a white man in a city that is two-thirds black. I had lived in Baltimore for a decade. I

had a sociology master's with a concentration on social stratification. And I had some experience reporting on race and class in Baltimore and other cities.

I gave our project the working title “Talking About Class,” knowing that—as in most American cities—any conversation in Baltimore that started with class would quickly arrive at race. I wanted to address both.

The station began lining up funding calls with local foundations, and the first person I spoke to was Diane Bell-McKoy, the president and CEO of Associated Black Charities. With the president of WYPR at my side, I began my pitch via speakerphone. Baltimore had one region, but separate worlds. We would hire an extra producer to help create weekly segments about inequality, and we'd contract with data mappers and a Web programmer to build an interactive resource for anyone who wanted to understand how the disparities and segregation in our region had emerged and persisted. It would be called “Talking About Class.”

“That's chickenshit,” Bell-McKoy said calmly. I was getting my difficult conversation sooner than expected. “You go into a room full of black people and say you want to talk about class, and they're going to hear, ‘I don't want to talk about race,’ ” she said.

The Lines Between Us, as the series was ultimately called, went on to win a DuPont Award. As I researched the series, the Occupy movement drew attention to America's income inequality, but my reporting kept drawing me to a different story: the structural racism that perpetuates that inequality, and the distinctly regional dynamics through which it operates. Diane Bell-McKoy's point about “class” meaning different things to different people was the first of many lessons I learned doing that series. When Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, MO, last summer, I was reminded of just how important those lessons are for journalists everywhere.

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hen the story of racial inequality erupts in a place like Ferguson, it is

quickly subsumed into the larger national debate about race. The national media descend, politicians and activists seize the spotlight, and there are the inevitable calls for a “frank” conversation. Early coverage gravitates toward the raw emotions stirred by the incident, followed by speculation about what it all means for the country and its values.

That oversimplified storyline delivers a reassuring arc with the potential for an implausibly neat resolution. Early reporting in Ferguson relied on numbers—protestors, arrests, injuries—and superficial pulse-taking to track that arc. It also

reduces racism to something a bigoted individual says or does, focusing on one powerful and symbolic interaction at a time. Were Michael Brown's hands up? Did racial prejudice cause officer Darren Wilson to perceive a threat where none existed? But the Ferguson story—like the Trayvon Martin story or the Henry Louis Gates “home-intrusion” story—wasn't about just one interaction. It wasn't just a temporary setback on a trail of progress from the Civil Rights movement to a post-racial era.

What's missing from this coverage are the regional dynamics of racial inequality—the policies and systemic realities in housing, criminal justice, schools, and the workforce that enable and sustain that inequality and that sow the anger and mistrust and frustration that eventually help create the circumstances in which young black men like Michael Brown get shot. A [2008 study](#) by the Maynard Institute on Journalism Education on the frequency with which news stories address structural racism found it was “rarely discussed.”

It's encouraging that, once the drama in Ferguson that fed the nonstop news beast dissipated, some of the subsequent reporting pushed beyond the contours of disparity—three black police officers out of 53 in an overwhelmingly black town, for instance—and into the roots of the region's inequality. A contemporary portrait has emerged of inner-ring St. Louis suburbs fractured into dozens of small municipalities, all in desperate competition for economic growth in a threadbare economy. “Businesses choosing where to locate can play the tiny municipalities off against one another for tax incentives, prompting a race to the bottom that robs them all of desperately needed revenue,” wrote Peter Coy in *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

For revenue, many of those municipalities rely heavily on court fees and fines that can pile up for poor residents and sometimes land them in jail. These municipalities “profit from poverty,” according to the headline of a [13,000-word piece](#) in *The Washington Post* by libertarian blogger Radley Balko that builds out from a report on municipal courts by legal aid group ArchCity Defenders. Balko attributes the practices of these revenue-hungry hamlets to a “legacy of segregation and structural racism” in which the white population would move further from the city each time black families began arriving, then “incorporate and zone to keep the black population at bay.”

In a piece called [“Why the Fires in Ferguson Won't End Soon,”](#) Slate's Jamelle Bouie widened the lens even further, addressing other divisive practices such as unequal policing, school segregation, and subprime loan targeting. Bouie, Coy, Balko, and other journalists who addressed the structure behind the St. Louis region's racial divide share one thing in common: They relied on the work of historian Colin Gordon, whose *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* lays out the local policies and practices through which whites were able to isolate themselves residentially from African-Americans over the past 100 years. Gordon says

segregation stems partly from Missouri's lax requirements for creating municipalities. "You have six houses and a signature?" Gordon says. "Fine. You're a town!"

Gordon's work captures a national racial dynamic at work. With real estate playing a major role in the accumulation of wealth, whites have long perceived residential racial integration as a financial risk, whether they admit to internal prejudices or not. But what's important about Gordon's work—and what's important for local journalists to develop—is a focus on *regional* dynamics. When it comes to white communities protecting their home values, the song remains the same; what Gordon shows is the particulars of how each generation in St. Louis has rearranged the tune.

In St. Louis, a 1916 law froze the racial composition of the city in place by declaring certain pockets of the city to be "Negro blocks." When the US Supreme Court struck down a similar law in 1917, realtors selling to African-Americans outside designated zones began finding themselves accused of professional misconduct. Then, racially restrictive covenants emerged: potential homebuyers would find clauses in their deeds or contracts restricting them from renting or selling to African-Americans. St. Louis was also "redlined" when federal maps graded neighborhoods on the risks that mortgage lending carried in particular locations; financial risk and the presence of minorities were highly correlated.

Businessweek's Peter Coy stumbled onto Gordon's work by ignoring recent coverage, which he said was "pretty much colored by what happened." Coy wanted to know what "people were thinking before Michael Brown was shot."

It's not that local media had ignored race. In 2010, St. Louis Public Radio collected five-years worth of on-air interviews and published them online as "[St. Louis History in Black and White](#)," an oral history that examines two major Supreme Court cases that started in St. Louis—*Dred Scott v. Sandford* and *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which in 1948 found racial housing covenants unconstitutional—and runs up to the Obama presidency. Freelance writer [Sarah Kendzior](#) covers regional current events through a race and class lens. The 2011 documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* reframes the destruction of a major public housing project that had been characterized as a failure of the welfare state as partly the result of decades of exclusionary policies, like the use of zoning decisions to block affordable housing projects, and the postwar development of the suburbs as a subsidy for the white working and middle classes.

But despite St. Louis' standing as the ninth most racially segregated region in America, digging up the roots of that inequality did not seem to be a major focus for the local media. Gordon described the post-Ferguson coverage as "surprisingly good," given that there had been so little attention devoted to structural racism prior to Brown's killing.

It was this kind of vacuum that my WYPR colleagues and I tried to fill in the Baltimore region with *The Lines Between Us*, which aired from September 2012 to October 2013. Our focus on the structural factors emerged as we dug through local archives and history books, discovering the thread connecting today’s practices to the past: Baltimore’s own federal “redline” map; a newspaper article from 1971 in which Baltimore’s housing commissioner threatened to ban poor suburban residents from city projects in an effort to get the handful of counties surrounding the city to build their own public housing; a report the same year by civil rights activists documenting the average markup on home prices made by “blockbusting” realtors as they bought low from white families and sold high to black families.

The distinctly regional dynamics of our inequality came to light in many stories. When the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision came down, Baltimore desegregated immediately, but with a free-choice implementation: Any student could attend any school. Nearly all the white students stayed in their schools, and a black student who integrated a white school would need transportation to get there. That often meant middle class black students left their poorer classmates behind in the shabbier schools. Today, only about 8 percent of city school students are white.

Journalists who want to do this kind of reporting must develop an “equity lens”: Are government policies and institutional practices disproportionately affecting particular groups? This approach will lead reporters away from tear gas clouds and shattered storefronts and toward less sexy but more telling stories like municipal zoning decisions and federal Title VI reports.

There are plenty of resources to get started. The documentary *Race: The Power of An Illusion* masterfully traces the evolution of racial inequality throughout the 20th century. In December, the Aspen Institute and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are hosting a three-day “Forum on Journalism, Race, and Society” to grapple with the future of this kind of coverage. Some local journalists (disclosure: including me) will be part of the forum, as will national writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates [see page 30], whose blockbuster article “The Case for Reparations,” published in *The Atlantic* last May, traces predatory and exploitative practices from 19th century lynching to 21st century subprime mortgage marketing.

The work of Columbia University law professor Olatunde Johnson covers “equality directives”—those rare instances in which American laws and regulations not only ban discrimination but require active steps to undo segregation and racial disparities.

Nikole Hannah-Jones's remarkable 2012 ProPublica series "[Living Apart](#)" examined one such directive: the requirement that HUD, and jurisdictions receiving HUD funding, "affirmatively further fair housing"; in other words, proactively address the legacy of housing discrimination. Hannah-Jones detailed HUD's reticence to withhold funding from jurisdictions that failed to remedy de facto segregation, and she captured the regional aspect of the story by examining practices in Westchester County, NY. To remain in compliance with HUD, jurisdictions must file reports detailing their greatest impediments to fair housing. These [reports](#) are full of story ideas, and lawsuits over equality directives are full of details.

Less than an hour after the first episode of *The Lines Between Us* aired, this post came through my Twitter feed: "I'm excited about . . . The Lines Between Us series. I wonder how deeply the pieces will go in light of the producer being a white man." What the tweeter, a black woman named Khalilah Harris, may not have known is that in the months before the series launched, all five members of the *Maryland Morning* staff were white. (Before the series began, we recruited an African-American journalist for a grant-funded position on the series. She later was made a permanent hire, and her contributions to stories beyond inequality have become essential.)

African-American communities and news outlets have discussed the structural nature of racial inequality throughout American history, since even before Ida B. Wells diagnosed lynching as "an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized." Mainstream journalism's failure to adequately diversify its newsrooms, despite decades of vowing to do so, is an obstacle to getting more of this kind of coverage. But even the most inclusive newsroom must also be introspective.

I considered Diane Bell-McKoy's "chickenshit" comment and the tweet from Khalilah Harris to be providential—for me, they set a tone we needed to keep. As a mostly white staff, we decided explicitly to make ourselves vulnerable, to embrace the most difficult conversations about race both in production and on the air, to invite criticism rather than retreat from it. A handful of community members agreed to serve as an advisory committee to the series, including a police officer, a former prisoner, and an anti-racism trainer. Our conversations, and the committee's feedback throughout the series, were occasionally discomfiting, but I think they made the series much better. We felt more accountable for how our characterization of a neighborhood, a person, or a topic might be perceived or felt by people of different

classes and races. It inspired one of the most powerful segments we aired: a commentary by a young black activist named Dayvon Love arguing that whites who try to “fix” black neighborhoods are “profiteering” from the misery of black people. “If you are unwilling to submit to black leadership to address our issues,” Love said, “then you are in my way.” A raw, honest discussion—at least for a town that is, as Bell-McKoy puts it, “polite” on race—broke out on our website soon after. A year and a half later, Love and his colleagues are still pushing the region’s civic leaders to address criticism of Baltimore’s “nonprofit industrial complex.”

It also helped to get out of the office and the archives and into the community. Bell-McKoy—who, by the end of our phone call, had made the first funding commitment to the series—invited me to a seminar where civic leaders from the Baltimore region discussed the structural factors that shaped racial inequity. That helped me build a conceptual framework for the series, and the stories of two of the attendees turned into some of the series’ best segments.

As we listened to people who couldn’t avoid confronting the reality of race and poverty, my privilege as a middle-class white person to choose to avoid those realities became clear, and that realization emboldened me to engage with it more directly as a reporter.

It’s easy to do this wrong. You have to appeal to an audience that includes both those who get defensive at the mention of racism and those who may think, “You’re a little late, but thanks for trying.” And trying does not mean you are entitled to gentle and patient guidance. As a Twitter user called @FeministGriote wrote this summer in reference to white people eager to learn about racial justice, people of color “are too busy trying to survive to be always holding your hand.”

LAWRENCE LANAHAN IS A BALTIMORE-BASED FREELANCE

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