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USA

Living under occupation in Ferguson

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Nicole Colson reports on the uprising against police murder in a Missouri city and the response of political and law enforcement authorities to double down on violence.

Since 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by an unidentified police officer in Ferguson, Mo., on August 9, the majority Black city just outside of St. Louis has been rocked by protests against the racism of a system that sees the lives of young Black men as disposable.

The response of authorities has been to flood the town with hundreds of police from dozens of neighboring cities and towns, decked out in riot gear, and armed with assault weapons, attack dogs and militarized vehicles for "crowd control." Protesters say "keeping the peace" is the last thing on these cops' minds—the invaders are acting in a deliberately provocative and aggressive manner, leading to an escalation of violence over several more nights of protest.

In the early morning hours of Wednesday, police shot and critically wounded another young man in Ferguson, not long after that night's protests dispersed. Police say they were called to the area by reports of men wearing ski masks and wielding shotguns, but when they arrived at the scene, the unnamed victim flashed a handgun—"forcing" them to shoot.

But most people in Ferguson—and millions more like them around the country—can't help but be skeptical about any police claims at this point.

LOOKING MORE like an occupying army than anything else, the massive police presence in Ferguson is responsible for the tensions and violence in Ferguson, having inflicted violent repression on protesters for four days and nights, including tear gas and rubber and wooden bullets.

Steve Walsh was an innocent bystander. On Tuesday, He was walking to the home of his two-month-old son and the child's mother when he got caught up in a police attack on protesters. Walsh told the Guardian that he was struck in the neck by a "wooden pellet" which left "a bloody, coin-sized wound behind his left ear," the article stated. Walsh told the reporter "I almost fainted. Blood just started coming out."

According to the Washington Post, the clashes come "like clockwork" when the sun goes down each night, those remaining on Ferguson's dark streets are met by heavily armored police, prompting confrontations and injuries."

Pictures of Ferguson on Wednesday night showed a huge cloud of smoke or gas over part of the city. Another showed what was reportedly some kind of an incendiary device used by police as it exploded in the street, throwing off a massive shower of sparks.

One writer at Jezebel described the I Am Mike Brown livestream playing on the KARG Argus Radio website:

Viewers watched as police fired rubber bullets into crowds of unarmed citizens. We watched as police advanced on a group of peaceful demonstrators. I Am Mike Brown livestream reported police were demanding that they turn off their

cameras. "Because they don't want witnesses," the reporter said.

And no wonder. While law enforcement tries to paint protesters as violent thugs, CNN cameras caught one white cop on camera taunting demonstrators: "Bring it!" he yelled, "All you fucking animals"bring it!"

Amid the violence of police, many protesters respond with a symbolic action that is a poignant echo of how Michael Brown died: with hands raised in the air, telling police, "Hands up. Don't shoot." Other protesters march with signs that draw a parallel to the assertion of basic humanity during the civil rights struggle only a few hours south of Ferguson in Memphis, Tenn.: "I am a man," "I am a woman."

IN A statement, Ferguson police "requested" that those wishing to hold vigils or protests "do so only during daylight hours in an organized and respectful manner. We further ask all those wishing to demonstrate or assemble to disperse well before the evening hours to ensure the safety of the participants and the safety of our community."

But for police to lecture the residents of Ferguson"or anyone else"about "safety" after they gunned down an unarmed teenager and treated protesters like animals is the height of hypocrisy. The cops in Ferguson and the governmental authorities who issue their orders don't deserve anyone's "respect," as their actions this past week have shown again and again.

Police still won't release the name of the officer who shot Michael Brown, because of the "threats" he might face. But they've been more than happy to share with the media the names and mug shots of those arrested in the past week for supposed looting.

It's an illustration of the racism that lies at the heart of the eruption of anger in Ferguson: A young unarmed Black man has his life stolen by a white police officer whose identity is protected"while Blacks alleged to have committed nonviolent crimes like burglary have their names dragged through the mud on the evening news.

Despite the violence of police, protesters have called out this double standard, night after night. Like Jammell Spann, a young demonstrator who yelled out at police clearing a protest, "All of my friends have been killed. I'm sick of it!"

On Thursday morning, it was reported that St. Louis Alderman Antonio French"who has been critical of Ferguson police and a presence at the protests, where he has been videotaping the police for the past several days"had been arrested. There was no word on the circumstances of that arrest as this article was being written, but it was no doubt retaliation for his criticism of the police.

The cops' fear of independent voices like French's is understandable"they have been going out of their way to make sure their preferred story is the only one coming out of Ferguson. As The Wire's Arit John wrote: "In the last few days reporters have said they were barred from entering the city. Reporters who have made it in have been tear gassed and threatened by police officers, alongside the residents of Ferguson."

Adding to the clampdown on reporting is the fact that the Federal Aviation Administration declared a "no-fly" zone for low-flying aircraft over the area on August 12, after a police helicopter was reportedly shot at"meaning that news helicopters are unable to gather aerial footage of confrontations between police and protesters.

IN SOME cases, journalists have been turned away from press conferences, and on Twitter, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Trymaine Lee—who is Black—reported on August 12: "I've been told to disperse and go to my residence."

The next day, when Washington Post reporter Wes Lowery and Huffington Post reporter Ryan Reilly questioned the pushy tactics of police and engaged in the constitutionally protected act of videotaping cops, they were immediately arrested.

The two were working from inside a local McDonald's that reporters have been using as a hub. Police, some in riot gear, came in and demanded to see ID. According to Lowery:

Moments later, the police reemerged, telling us that we had to leave. I pulled my phone out and began recording video.

An officer with a large weapon came up to me and said, "Stop recording."

I said, "Officer, do I not have the right to record you?"

He backed off but told me to hurry up. So I gathered my notebook and pens with one hand while recording him with the other hand.

As I exited, I saw Ryan to my left, having a similar argument with two officers. I recorded him, too, and that angered the officer.

Apparently not exiting the restaurant fast enough for the cops, a confused Lowery was arrested—and so was Reilly:

Multiple officers grabbed me. I tried to turn my back to them to assist them in arresting me. I dropped the things from my hands.

"My hands are behind my back," I said. "I'm not resisting. I'm not resisting." At which point one officer said: "You're resisting. Stop resisting."

That was when I was most afraid—more afraid than of the tear gas and rubber bullets.

"They essentially acted as a military force," Reilly later told MSNBC's Chris Hayes. "It was incredible. The worst part was he slammed my head against the glass purposefully on the way out of McDonald's, and then sarcastically apologized for it."

The reporters were told they were under arrest for trespassing in a McDonald's—but the officers refused to give them their names or badge numbers. Once word got around to police officials that two reporters had been arrested, they were quickly released.

Residents of Ferguson, however, don't know when they'll be released from the police occupation they now live under.

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"It's like the elephant in the room," Yusra, a resident of East St. Louis, told The Daily Beast's Justin Glawe. "We are being occupied."

She added: "They say it's the death of three men that started a chain reaction of death and destruction in Gaza. Will we as a people rise up like the people of Gaza? Will our community be bombed like last night with tear gas? That was a terrorist attack."

BUT TO hear St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar tell it, the police have acted as a model of restraint.

"To maintain that restraint, it is, frankly, remarkable," Belmar said of his officers after several nights of protests, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

The police say they won't release the name of the officer who shot Michael Brown out of "fears for his safety." They've had no comment about Dorian Johnson's claim that officers refused to take his statement. According to Freeman Bosley, Johnson's lawyer and the former mayor of St. Louis, Bosley contacted the police to offer an interview with his client—the person standing closest to Michael Brown when he was shot.

"They didn't even want to talk to him," Bosley told MSNBC. "[The police] don't want the facts. What they want is to justify what happened...What they are trying to do now is justify what happened instead of trying to point out the wrong. Something is wrong here, and that's what it is."

Dorian Johnson told MSNBC that he understands the outrage that protesters in Ferguson feel toward police:

There are two crowds. An older crowd that wants justice, but there's anger. Then it's the younger crowd that wants revenge, but there's anger there, too. What do you expect when something is steadily occurring and it's hurting the community and nobody is speaking out or doing anything about it. I feel their anger, I feel their disgust.

But according to Ferguson City Police Chief Thomas Jackson, the "trouble" in Ferguson is being caused by "outside agitators." On Fox News' Hannity show, Jackson said:

It's a lot of outside agitators that are causing the violence. We've had several very peaceful protests—they're angry, they have questions they want answers to. I understand that. I get that. But the community has now stepped up once this violence happened. Our community leaders, the clergy, some of the activists, have stepped forward and said, "Enough is enough."

That tactic—pitting "good" protesters against "bad" ones, and blaming violence and property destruction on "outside agitators"—is a tried-and-true method of police and the state. During the civil rights movement, complaints about "outside agitators" and "mobs bent on violence" were part of an attempt to divide and conquer, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explained in a SocialistWorker.org article about the urban rebellions of the 1960s:

[T]he rebellions are seen as the dysfunctional cousin to the peaceful and nonviolent Southern civil rights movement. Thus, while the civil rights movement is universally lauded as successful because of its strategic emphasis on nonviolence, the riots are universally condemned because of the violence inherent in them. Moreover, they are also blamed for alienating white allies and supporters, and are widely viewed as the origins of white "backlash politics."

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A New York Times editorial, written only a few weeks after the riots in Detroit in 1967, captured this argument: "The riots, rather than developing a clamor for great social progress to wipe out poverty, to a large extent have had the reverse effect and have increased the crises for use of police force and criminal law."

Yet that perspective didn't appear to correspond with a number of polls taken 10 days later that showed massive support for the expansion of social programs aimed at mitigating the material deprivation that many connected with the spreading violence.

In a poll of both African Americans and whites, strong majorities supported anti-poverty programs. As a Washington Post headline summarized, "Races agree on ghetto abolition and the need for a WPA [the federal Works Projects Administration]-style program." Some 69 percent of Americans supported federal efforts to create a jobs program, and 65 percent believed in tearing down ghettos. Another 60 percent supported a federal program to eliminate rats, and 57 percent supported summer camp programs for Black youth.

THAT FERGUSON was a powder keg of anger waiting to explode isn't the fault of "outside agitators," nor of its majority African American population. It is the fault of the racist system—and, in particular, the sentries of that system, the police—responsible for the killing of Michael Brown.

Ferguson is a community where the stamp of racism and inequality is imprinted on every aspect of life—from jobs to housing to racial profiling. It was once known in the area as a haven for Blacks who sought to escape poverty and violence in St. Louis, and who were prevented from living in more affluent neighborhoods as a result of redlining and other discriminatory housing practices. But as Blacks moved into Ferguson, whites fled, a New York Times editorial reports:

In 1980, the town was 85 percent white and 14 percent black; by 2010, it was 29 percent white and 69 percent Black. But Blacks did not gain political power as their numbers grew. The mayor and the police chief are white, as are five of the six City Council members. The school board consists of six white members and one Hispanic. As [University of Iowa professor Colin] Gordon explains, many Black residents, lacking the wealth to buy property, move from apartment to apartment...

The disparity is most evident in the Ferguson Police Department, of which only three of 53 officers are Black. The largely white force stops Black residents far out of proportion to their population, according to statistics kept by the state attorney general. Blacks account for 86 percent of the traffic stops in the city, and 93 percent of the arrests after those stops.

Ferguson residents have spoken powerfully in ways that put a human face on these statistics. As Michael Brown's mother Leslie McSpadden told CNN's Don Lemon in between sobs, "Just because my son is a 6'43 male Black walking down the city street does not meet he meets the profile for anything other than just walking down the street."

Michael Brown Sr. said in the same interview, "My son don't have justice, and we don't have no peace. If he has no justice, we won't get no peace."

That's why the smear that the people of Ferguson have engaged in unrestrained "looting" and "rioting" since the death of Michael Brown is so despicable.

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The biggest property damage was done to a QuikTrip convenience store that was set on fire and then tagged with anti-police graffiti. As it turned out, the crowd likely turned its anger on the store when word spread that someone at the store made the call to police reporting an alleged case of shoplifting, which was reportedly the pretext for the officer to stop Michael Brown in the first place. Other targets of protesters include a Walmart and check-cashing store—that is, symbols of poverty and exploitation in an impoverished neighborhood.

PERHAPS REALIZING that the heavy-handed response from cops has only inflamed the situation, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon announced on Thursday that he was going to pull St. Louis County police out of Ferguson—reportedly assuring clergy and community members that there will be "operational shifts" and "you all will see a different tone."

It would be hard for the police and politicians to do any worse than they already have in infuriating the people of Ferguson. But however "different" the tone of police enforcement is, the angry tone of the protest won't change. It is a bitter reaction to the injustice at the heart of not only Michael Brown's death, but the death of John Crawford, a 22-year-old Black man shot and killed by police in a Beavercreek, Ohio, Walmart because he was carrying a toy gun; of the death of Ezell Ford, a 25-year-old Black man shot and killed by police as he lay on the sidewalk in South Los Angeles, complying with their orders; of the death of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old Black man choked to death by police on a Staten Island sidewalk in New York; of the death of Dante Parker, a 36-year-old Black man Tasered to death by police in Victorville, Calif.

These are just some of the most recent examples of Black lives stolen by police murder. And beyond the killings, untold numbers of people—men and women—have their lives upended by an injustice system that is racist to its core.

And what has been the response of America's first Black president to this epidemic of Black lives stolen? Almost total silence.

The president expressed his condolences over the killing of Michael Brown, calling it "heartbreaking." But as tear gas and rubber bullets were being fired at protesters and riot police roamed the streets of Ferguson on Wednesday night, White House Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz tweeted from Martha's Vineyard, where the president is currently vacationing: "Readout of tonight's social gathering coming shortly—spoiler alert: a good time was had by all."

Obama's failure to offer any substantial political initiative on the urgent question of fighting racism is because he is dedicated to maintaining the system that produces it.

Instead, we should be looking to the example of those fighting racism and fighting to win justice for Michael Brown—and all the other "Michael Browns" across this country whose names we don't yet know.

Like those at the historically Black Howard University where, on Wednesday night, during a meeting about freshman move-in, students felt compelled to respond to Michael Brown's death and the protests in Ferguson. In solidarity, hundreds gathered for a powerful picture—hands raised, faces defiant.

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