The Late Show

We went to Ferguson to find a story, even if we had to make it ourselves.

AP Photo/Jeff Roberson

By Nigel Duara

December 8, 2014

Justice
Oregon Humanities Magazine
Race
Media and Journalism

Days broke warm and sticky, the humidity hanging over our shoulders like a load of wet laundry. By mid-August, protests were in full swing every day, marchers rounding the same familiar cracks in the sidewalk, casually tossing trash into sewer grates.

It became routine after the first of couple days. The sun drifted behind fat, blue clouds, humidity hung, and the mosquitoes found us.

"They always look for me," I told my producer, Priya. "Sweet blood."

We spent our days in St. Louis city and the surrounding county, looking for witnesses or autopsy reports or which politician was flying in next. But without fail, each evening we found ourselves back behind the yellow tape, in the crowd, waiting for the show.

And a show is what it became in Ferguson, Missouri, in the weeks after an unarmed black eighteen-year-old was shot and killed by a white police officer in a city where most of the cops are white and most of the residents are black. Maybe that's what it was from the beginning. Protesters south, cops north. Sometimes the police would push in from farther south, trapping the protesters between two lines.

This had the potential to be civil rights history. That, ostensibly, is why we in the media were there. From either coast, we came to see firsthand what we'd previously seen only as black-and-white images from the 1960s: protesters versus police, a changing nation, a signal moment in a national shouting argument about race.

At first blush, the right elements were there: a city wracked by racial discord, white flight, and redlining; aggressive police officers; clusters of protesters more ready to loot than march. If the reminders of the 1960s weren't clear enough, at one point a CNN International news anchor even asked why police didn't clear the protests with hoses.

When I set out for Ferguson from Portland, I imagined reporters as impartial observers, the blue helmets in international conflicts watching what was happening and sending it back in text, pictures, sound. I wasn't prepared for the role the media would play in the story. I wasn't prepared to deal with how the story permeated every inch of my life, from the food I ate to the people I spoke with. Even when I was back at my hotel alone at night, Ferguson was there: in my clothes that stank of tear-gas funk, garlic, and burning trash; in my dreams.

Every night began like this: darkness approached and we parked at the police command center and walked down West Florissant Avenue, the street where Mike Brown was killed. Marchers started doing laps in a giant rectangle, walking past the looted businesses and the boarded-up windows shattered a night or two earlier. The chants got louder. The police assembled. The sun set. And then, almost by design, something would crack.

The reasons varied from night to night. Missouri governor Jay Nixon issued a curfew, and protesters used the midnight deadline to challenge police. Police would order marchers to keep marching as part of an order against "static assembly." Protesters would stop moving, forcing a face-off. Sometimes, the police would simply decide the situation was unsafe, order dispersal, and begin firing tear gas, rubber bullets, and mace bombs into the crowd.

I came to believe I understood the rhythms of police action. First, they would present themselves in ordinary uniforms. Then they would park armored personnel carriers at either end of Florissant. Once I saw officers carrying wooden batons and gas masks on their hips, I knew the night wouldn't go well.

We watched the small skirmishes expand into larger clashes. We ducked into the sole burger joint that stayed open after sundown, its panicked owner handing out sodas between frantic, wide-eyed stares at whoever was walking through his door. We ate, we waited, we smoked, we watched. Then, inevitably, the police would have enough and order protesters to disperse. Without fail, the protesters refused. And out came the tear gas. One night, police appeared to use one of my videographers as a tracer round, following him as he scurried away from the gas, launching canister after canister near his feet as he fled.

The two biggest dangers in a place like this come from the crowd. The first is trampling. People, screaming, ran from the slightest sound. We later learned a Maoist revolutionary group was throwing firecrackers designed to sound like gunfire. The second, of course, is gunfire, fired from the crowd, at the protest or at the cops or at the sky or at nothing at all. One man went to the hospital in critical condition, shot in the neck. It's a small miracle no one else was wounded by bullets.

We got gassed, we went home, we drank. Then we did it again, a day later. We were there to report on a police shooting. We stayed, and it became something else entirely.

Reporters like me are trained to cover events. We're not as good with tectonic cultural shifts or marking depth in the river of time, but give us something with borders and a running clock, something with boundaries temporal and geographic, and we'll get you a story: NFL games and political debates, 3 a.m. murder scenes and city council meetings.

Each night, we covered an event. Some of us waited at the command center or in a cordoned-off media staging area in a fast-food parking lot. The rest were in the crowd, following protesters up and down Florissant, jamming cameras or recorders in faces, walking backward like campus tour guides. Listen, and you'll hear us in the background of most interviews from the protests—"Watch your back! Watch your back!"—chirping to each other to avoid cracks in the sidewalk, a clump of police in riot gear, sullen protesters looking for a fight.

Since we didn't have the boundaries we were used to, we created them. The nominal theater was West Florissant, but in truth, it was broader than that. It was an arena in the minds of the men and women on the street, each side wearing their respective uniforms, created by people who followed the #Ferguson hashtag or who donated to a fund set up for Darren Wilson, the officer who killed Brown. Two sides, a boundary, and a ticking clock. We were back to news normalcy.

At some point, I began to question whether we were doing more harm than good. We had a duty to be there—this much is clear. Who knows what either side might have done with the cameras off.

But the arena we created by being present is different than one construed by a few local TV cameramen and one harried print reporter trying to capture video with the phone in her right hand while tweeting with the one in her left. The arena is one in which even the slightest turn of the screw makes news, where a single arrest in broad daylight on an otherwise unremarkable street is broadcast to the world.

St. Louis is a relatively small major American city, surrounded and choked off by the larger county. White flight meant prosperous residents left decades ago, heading west into the cities of O'Fallon, St. Charles, and beyond. South St. Louis County stayed white but never prospered, and is now a bastion of working-class white families, largely Catholic. North County is mostly black.

The police on camera in Ferguson came from South County to enforce the law in North County. That is how it works here. North County police departments grab recruits from South County. Racial tensions endure and are exacerbated by this dynamic. And then there's the matter of money.

St. Louis County is divided into ninety municipalities, tiny fiefdoms sometimes no more than a few square blocks. Each has a mayor and each has a police force. Many of the municipalities wouldn't exist were it not for the police, whose tickets in some cases make up more than 30 percent of the city budget.

The protests in Ferguson were about many things, and one of them is this dynamic of white administrations making money off the fines paid by black residents. The underlying message is that racial disparity between the public service and the people it serves creates friction, a misunderstanding between the people delivering that service and its recipients. This is also a criticism of newsrooms.

There is an effort among news organizations to remedy this. Newspapers have long been strongholds of white, upper-middle-class men, and change is afoot: more women and people of color are rising to positions of power than at any time in the history of American journalism. Look no further than the New York Times, where Jill Abramson was most recently executive editor, replaced by her deputy, Dean Baquet, who is black.

But journalism overall still lags behind the broader employment market, and the recession pushed people of color and women even further out of newsrooms. We are yet further, as an industry, from the people we cover. Some companies assemble newsroom staffs that racially and ethnically reflect the populations of the cities they represent. But the truth is, this doesn't necessarily bring us closer to the people we write about. I've been in lily-white Iowa newsrooms and those in the Deep South where half of my coworkers were black, but what I've observed is that black or brown skin doesn't make a reporter interested in the issues of black or brown people.

This may, at first glance, seem callous. But I find it more callous that we would simply assume a person of matching ethnicity will automatically bring a better understanding of that race's culture and experience to a story or beat. This is not a call against diversifying newsrooms, but rather to consider factors beyond race, which might be the easiest and most obvious way to sort people but isn't always the most valuable way.

Simply being brown or black doesn't mean you'll understand people any better. West Montgomery, Alabama, had some of the most abject poverty I've seen in the United States. One reporter assigned to cover the area—what little coverage we gave it—was black. But he was a military veteran from a good home in New York State. He lived in a completely different part of town, ate at different restaurants, experienced Alabama through an entirely different lens. All he shared with the impoverished in the Deep South was the color of his skin and a presumption from editors that this should unify him and his subjects.

This is, at best, ripe for mocking and, at worst, dangerous. I went to school in Missouri, a hundred or so miles from Ferguson. It remains a deeply segregated state. Three is the number most often referenced regarding the police in Ferguson: there are fifty-three officers on the police force and only three are black. But the issue goes deeper than that. The police officers monitoring the civil unrest in Ferguson were not from the area. Most police officers who worked that area came from outside of it, from the heavily white, heavily Catholic exurbs south of the city. This is where part of the tension lay, and it was exacerbated by racial disparity.

Not all of us who went to Ferguson are white; I'm not. But we all enjoyed a kind of privilege—we didn't have to be there but for our jobs, and we would be leaving, unlike those from the local media. We reported what we saw through that prism. And, perhaps worse, we shifted from being necessary observers to partial participants. We couldn't extricate ourselves from the situation, and our presence and attention were affecting the actions that we were observing. This seems to be a fundamental truth about reporting. But to see it happen in Ferguson was to see it in slow motion, stretched across a timeline of days that became weeks.

From my perspective, the shift happened on Tuesday, August 19. It won't be marked as much on the Ferguson calendar. Hardly anyone was arrested and no one was shot. But it laid bare everything that bothered me about our presence at the protests.

The previous night had been filled with more gunfire and more tear gas, and I wasn't sure why. Protesters marching north were met by police who ordered their dispersal. The police said objects were thrown at them. There was no inciting event, just a drawn-out conversation between police and protesters that once again ended in a spasm of violence. It almost seemed rote.

I spent Tuesday morning trying to convince people in power to give me Mike Brown's autopsy report. I told them a family-ordered autopsy of Brown was the only one available, and I felt that the state's version could corroborate or refute the facts presented: that a bullet traveled through Brown's brain and out of his eye, that the bullet's path showed Brown had his arms up, that the case was closed.

The truth would help, I told them. I made the pledge in earnest, because I believed it then—and I believe it now. The facts, laid out without hyperbole or guesswork, would help answer people's questions. They were crucial to the story. But I didn't get the report, and at that moment, it felt like the story slipped through my fingers. Not only the story, but maybe the answer to the whole question of Ferguson and the nightly riots: In what part of his body was Mike Brown shot—his back, his hand, his armpit? Did the evidence show he charged at the police officer?

I shuffled to the parking lot and sat in the driver's seat of my black Volkswagen rental. I locked the door and stared at the steering wheel. I felt a ringing in my ears. It took me a moment to realize I was screaming.

That night, the usual issues cropped up early: Protesters fought each other, police intervened. Someone threw something at the officers. The officers ordered their dispersal. But then something kind of magical happened. Maybe they tired of tear gas, maybe the order to keep moving wore protesters out. But for whatever reason, on that Tuesday, the script briefly changed. Protesters, aided by peacekeepers who separated them from the police, began to disperse.

Not all of them, and not all at once, but they did begin to move, slowly, then picking up steam, a river of people with signs and bullhorns and children perched on shoulders walking back into neighborhoods or returning to their cars. It seemed peaceful and calm. Some people even smiled.

But we in the media were still there. And we didn't budge.

Some protesters saw that, particularly the ones who weren't ready to leave. The police ordered us to return to the media staging area in the fast-food parking lot. Then they told us to leave. Then they couldn't make up their minds. Should the media go north or south? Should they be forced to walk through the neighborhoods east and west of the protests?

In the meantime, protesters slipped into the media area.

"Save us!" one man shouted repeatedly. "Media! Stand with us! Don't leave! Don't leave! Don't leave!"

Police said they saw a protester with a gun. A SWAT team pushed into the media area, grabbing people they suspected of throwing things at officers or concealing weapons. Guns leveled at the media-protester mix, the police threw people to the ground, protesters mostly but also some reporters. Canada's CTV News reporter Tom Walters was cuffed after asking a police commander why they were forcing the media from the area.

"I just asked a question!" he shouted repeatedly as he was held down.

The police stopped distinguishing between protesters and the media. Ferguson was about Us vs. Them, and we had the luck and misfortune to be Them to both protesters and police. Police said we were interfering with their actions. Protesters said we were hiding video of real police abuse.

Into this mix stepped Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol. He took control of the police presence after a week of protests and became the public face of law enforcement. He would later tell a packed, majority-black church that he sympathized with their struggle and believed in rights for his own son, a black twenty-year-old with tattoos and baggy pants.

But on this Tuesday night, Johnson was all cop. And the cops couldn't decide what they wanted to do with us.

They herded us south. Then a cluster of police began pushing us east. Another cluster, apparently not in communication with their fellow officers, ordered us to go west. Chaos. Shouting. More guns from the police, pointed at our faces, the red dots from rifle sights speckling our clothes.

I spotted Johnson on the edge of the crowd, behind police.

"Captain Johnson," I yelled over the helmets of the advancing police line, "is this going the way you thought it would?"

He glared at me and walked to the other side of the crowd.

We had become the story. We were the people they were trying to disperse. When we moved or failed to move, the police action we were reporting on was what was happening to us.

I believe most of us did the best we could with the situation we were presented. But I also clearly remember dumb tweets that presented a protester's opinion as fact. I remember a reporter from a small start-up news organization putting his hand over another reporter's camera to block a shot of protesters rolling on the ground in a fistfight. I remember shockingly stupid questions lobbed at police, ministers, and activists during their respective press conferences.

And here's what I saw: Reporters getting arrested and screaming. Reporters getting detained and calmly waiting five minutes before they were released. Well-known TV faces creating a scene on the sidewalk, bringing marchers to a halt—a violation of the police order. Cameramen shouting at protesters to get out of their shot. Reporters giving people their water. Reporters sharing milk to wash people's eyes of tear gas. Reporters running from gunshots. Reporters running toward tear gas. Reporters screaming. Reporters crying.

And each day, I readied myself for the backlash. Where was it? Where was the outrage? Where were the websites seemingly built explicitly around outrage? Where were the easy stories from lazy writers looking for easy clickbait? Hell, where were the SEO-friendly headlines?

"You Won't Believe What This Reporter Said on Camera!"

"Privileged Media Gets National Race Story Wrong!"

"17 Reasons Reporters Shouldn't Be in Ferguson"

"Protester OBLITERATES Media Narrative!"

RIP
MIKE
BROWN

Instead, we got praise for our work and tweets hoping for our safety. All appreciated. All utterly misplaced. We enjoyed the most privilege of those on the streets of Ferguson in August, no question. We had the most choice. And yet, it seemed to me, we were upheld as doing the most righteous of work. But we and the public and social media had created an arena from which no one could escape—not the young, male protesters who liked whipping off their shirts and being the center of attention nor the cops in riot gear, sporting small smiles. Each side was trapped in a conflict from which they would not and could not back down, and each side bore a share of the public's blame. We in the media were generally held out as doing good work. The ones being excoriated were the people with the least amount of choice.

Reporters naturally affect the course of the stories we cover and, in the process, we are often seen as righteous heroes, when, in fact, most of us are just doing our jobs. Nowhere is this more true than in an ongoing crisis, one prolonged over days and weeks, the same tired actors bracing themselves each morning for a fight, the same weary folks heading home after a night of standoffs, violence, close calls, and near misses.

Alex S. Jones runs the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University. He told a panel there that the media were indeed guilty of occasional sensationalism and erroneous reporting in Ferguson, but said they did their duty by bringing national attention to the situation and putting police militarization squarely in the national conversation.

I asked him what we could we have done differently. How was the coverage handled? Were there lessons we could learn for future coverage?

Jones seemed uncertain. He was happy, generally, with the fact that we were there at all. And he believed much of the reporting was crucial to our broader understanding of how police react with their backs to the wall. But he was dismayed by some of the tactics: for instance, a national network news reporter who, on air, loudly pledged to help protesters; and print reporters who took to the Sunday talk shows immediately after their brief detainments by police.
“There was plenty to report, and it was worthwhile,” Jones said. That said, he added, “I don't think journalists should make themselves the focus of the story.”

So if national media couldn't do the job, would local media have handled it admirably, with sensitivity and good judgment? That might not have been true, either.

What I can offer is this: as media splinters and diversifies, more of us will be in more places for longer periods of time. This time, it was Vice News with a live-streaming camera and Argus Streaming News, a news outlet that materialized wholesale at the protests. There was Infowars, the right-wing conspiracy theorist site, and the *Huffington Post*, winner of a Pulitzer Prize.

We're going to be in these places, with these people, affecting the nature of the news. Our role is absolutely necessary—that's true. But it's also true that we are altering the story as we report it, and there's probably no satisfying solution to this conundrum.

Nigel Duara recently left his position as a reporter for the Associated Press in Portland, where he led coverage of the Ferguson civil unrest, investigated the Boy Scouts confidential perversion files, and unraveled the history of a Bosnian war criminal living for decades in the US. In January, he will begin his new position focusing on immigration and the border as a national writer for the Los Angeles Times.