“Freedom, Equality, and Race”: Remembering Jeffrey B. Ferguson

Marisa Parham | published June 28, 2018

This post is part of a week-long forum, organized by Mary Hicks, honoring Professor Jeffrey Brown Ferguson who passed away on March 11, 2018. Ferguson was the Karen and Brian Conway ’80 Presidential Teaching Professor of Black Studies at Amherst College. This online forum includes reflections from David Blight, Mari Crabtree, Marisa Parham, Werner Sollors, and Uday Mehta.

I am sitting in a coffee shop listening to the recorded voice of my friend and colleague, Jeffrey Ferguson. For several days I have been trying to write about an essay Jeff published in Daedalus for a 2011 special issue on “Race in the Age of Obama.” In the years since he was first diagnosed with cancer, it had become increasingly common to talk about Ferguson’s accomplishments as a teacher. And indeed, there was a long span of years when he worked tirelessly with his colleagues at Amherst College to reimagine the work of Black Studies in what was then the new millennium. At the same time, focusing on his curricular interventions and program-building without mentioning his accomplished self-fashioning as a Black intellectual risks reducing his life’s work to a story about institutional service. In the wake of his death, the Daedalus essay seems worth revisiting because it exemplifies so much of the intellectual rationale that motivated Jeff Ferguson’s scholarly work. This rationale later undergirded his contributions to an introductory Black Studies curriculum that simultaneously reassured Black students that they carry an important intellectual heritage, and also asserted the symbiotic relationship between Black intellectual traditions and the liberal arts more generally.

The Daedalus essay, “Freedom, Equality, Race,” is a clear and concise rendering of the problematics at the heart of American racial politics, with a special eye to how those politics circulate around, through, and often despite Black racial self-understanding. Capacious and insightful, the article takes its reader across an American landscape in which Fitzgerald’s Gatsby and Ellison’s invisible man are as yoked to each other as de Tocqueville and Patrick Henry’s assertions about democracy and liberty were yoked to the American slave trade. Ferguson’s essay is the kind of essay that students in Black Studies are trained to write in their introductory courses. The essay takes its major thematic cues from a set of African American intellectual traditions and uses the basic instruments of classic rhetoric and argumentation to put a variety of perspectives into play around large and enduring questions of race and American politics.

Indeed, one might think of the language from Ferguson’s syllabus in his rendition of the course, “Black Studies 200: Debates in Black Studies”:
“With proper effort and study, a student should emerge from this course augmented both in the knowledge of race related debates and in the will to enter important discussions with informed participants. Having accomplished this, he or she will have taken a large step toward genuine critical thought, the main goal of any worthwhile college education and the lifeblood of all free societies.”

“Debates” is the second of a three-course sequence that first teaches advanced critical reading skills, then argumentation, and then independent research. Ferguson’s courses invariably favored male, African American, and mid-century, thus betraying his own sense of intellectual debt to Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin, but also demonstrating how and why his colleagues could adapt the model to their own visions of what a Black intellectual tradition looks like. The courses were designed to provide students with a deeply grounded position against the deficiency narratives that had come to define higher ed’s imagination of Black student possibility during the rise of institutional multiculturalism. In many ways Black students were caught between a rock and a hard place—on the one hand, always at risk for the kinds of psychic damage wreaked by institutional low expectation, and on the other, faced with what Ferguson frames in “Freedom, Equality, Race” as “remembering the uncomfortable and often repeated fact that our most cherished American principles have as one of their most important sources the minds of slavemasters and slave traders.” He often spoke of the immense amount of material and emotional energy Black students lost to their (reasonable) fear and often righteous anger, while also witnessing how other students were allowed to ignore that struggle by imagining their distance from its foundational terms. With that in mind, the curricular premise was simple: once you accept that Black intellectual traditions are not just about content, that they also carry method, fear of the master’s tools might be short-circuited. Black students already have tools, if only they could learn how to see them. Thinking about Black life not only requires skill; it is itself a skill set that students would find applicable in any major. Talk to any of Ferguson’s former “intro” students from any background and they will inevitably say, “every student at Amherst should learn this.” He was an icon, and with good reason.

Despite knowing all this, I cannot get past the fact that “Freedom, Equality, Race,” is not the most exciting essay. I will try to parse my response. My first thought is that it lacks a certain kind of animating force. I check myself because I know that when I am reading this essay, I am reading the work of someone who died too young and too recently. The inclination, the desire, to conjure presence can be overpowering.

But it is true. Even though “Freedom, Equality, Race” is an important essay, a useful essay that sticks its landing at every stage, something is missing. This is doubly surprising because it is brimming with the basic concepts and ideas with which Jeff worked tirelessly. Anyone who knows him well could easily scan for the myriad interconnected ideas that many of us witnessed him work through for years. It hits me. “Freedom, Equality, Race” reads like a primer. But for what? There is a paragraph to which I keep returning, a sweeping description of African Americans who:

“Out of the necessity of historic struggle, have formed an alternately heroic, sacrificial, and sometimes melodramatic sense of group belonging laden with collective memories of struggle on the wrong side of the American color line. These struggles have served not only as ways of acquiring freedom, but also as a means of performing it culturally and politically across a great range that encompasses modes of self-fashioning, artistic styles, and direct forms of political resistance and direct forms of political resistance and protest.”
It is difficult to connect to the tone here. It reads as too generalized, too distant, like a rhetorical performance of an anthropological gaze, or of the erudite definition-making of Black Reconstruction-era writing. Ferguson is discussing why African Americans would hold on to racial identity, or what he would probably call “race feeling.” But the affective quality of that identity has been emptied out in this rendition. This is not the cool eye of analysis, this just feels cold. Unable to resist recuperation, I read it as the writer’s discomfort with speaking directly, lest it undermine the essay’s sweeping claims about the foreclosed arcs of American history, or the endless and uneasy tension between freedom and equality on the American scene. But I do not feel recuperated. The feeling of loss continues to deepen.

Increasingly bereft, I do what so many of us do today when they feel themselves becoming lost—I turn to the internet. I am trying to hunt down video and radio transcripts from Jeff’s teenage years as a New Jersey transplant, when he joined the Guardian Angels (another tool, another curriculum). Local newspapers described him as perched between the Ivy League and teaching kung fu to his troops in the street. They seemed perplexed by the relative lack of tension he carried, suspended between what they can only imagine as distant poles, rather than as mere facets of a single Black life.

Clicking along, I come across a recorded speech Ferguson gave in early 2011, at a large forum convened under the same theme as the Daedalus issue. Instead of offering a formal rundown of the “Freedom, Equality, Race” essay, he uncharacteristically opened with a personal anecdote. It was unexpectedly moving to hear this more vulnerable Jeff in such a public venue. He does not look well, but the voice is his, alternately erudite and playful, genteel Ellisonian tricksterism working in plain sight, registering his usual dislike of the “easy dishonesty of autobiographical presentations,” even if, just this one time, he is going to try something new. [n.b. click here to watch.]

Always one step ahead, he then presented the coming lecture as an opportunity to add contours his flatly written original essay; flat in the sense that it was written “at a distance.” After dutifully and sincerely invoking W.E.B. Du Bois’ still “reverberative” formulation of modern Black life—“what does it feel like to be a problem?” —Ferguson draws a lightning-fast parallel to “a similarly inflected question” posed to a young James Baldwin by the Harlem hustlers who ask him: “Who’s little boy are you?” The questions hang over the story he is about to tell of growing up in the Chattanooga projects during the civil rights movement, and of understanding this as a matter of great pride and privilege:

“Because I was born—bathed—in the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. With so many heroes, so many mythical events, recent vintage...who needed fairy tales?...My people were cool, and smart, and strong and stylish and somehow transcendentally right in a somehow transcendently right in a wonderful way.”

In retrospect, one can see how this perspective permeated Ferguson’s understanding of why Black Studies is important, and why studying Black experiences remediates Americanness. Despite struggle, Black people are ultimately the heroes of this story. We can hear this in how he describes his relationship with his aunt, whom he credits as instrumental in developing his love for Black life, identifying him as her little black boy. “To me the term black boy meant that I somehow fit in with all the rightness and coolness around me, and that made Aunt Kat’s nurturing love seem even more delicious.”

When I hear the pride and see the smile in his delivery of the word “delicious,” I am reminded of a few years ago, when my colleague Khary Polk came across a memo describing the inaugural mission of the
Black Studies department at Amherst College, written by chairperson Sonia Sanchez. In it, Sanchez gets right down to business:

“A people without a thorough knowledge of roots and history cannot move into the future, cannot rest in the proper chair of life. We, of the Black Studies Department at Amherst, will begin the transplanting of roots, with the expectation that they will bring forth new and plentiful fruit for all to be nourished.”

Written in 1974, Sanchez’s memo resonates with a kind of common sense underwritten by a determination to survive by doing far more than ever just surviving: Who’s little boy are you? Gone too soon, yes, but Jeff is somewhere, planting, nourishing, building.