

Whose Streets (2017) documents the tragic death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed the unarmed black teenager, resulting in widespread protests and calls for reform. While the community's anger at this injustice is entirely understandable, I continue to feel disappointed when people, in general, respond to systemic harm with measures that are counterproductive to long-term change.

The film captures the massive protest turnout despite comprehensive efforts by city and state officials to suppress them. Yet what I find disheartening is that these same citizens did not mobilize to enact change through the most basic and accessible democratic tool in the United States: voting. Prior to Brown's death, fewer than 15% of registered voters in Ferguson participated in local elections. While turnout rose to nearly 30% in the next election, the number of new registrations did not noticeably increase. While their outrage is justified, the fact that it did not translate into civic power was disappointing. I agree that protests play an important role in raising awareness, disrupting systems, and pressuring oppressive institutions; organizing voter registration and turn out is equally, if not more, important. Finding the energy to organize protests while neglecting voter mobilizations feels like a glaring oversight.

One scene that stood out was a roadblock organized by activist Brittany Ferrell. She defended her actions as being in service of a greater good, and while I agree with her motivations, I can't condone tactics that obstruct citizens or violate the law. It reminded me of how people across the political spectrum often justify unlawful behavior under the banner of protest. Whether its MAGA truckers blocking the Canadian border, Palestine protestors preventing Columbia students from attending class, or most egregiously, the January 6th rioters who attempted an insurrection on the US Capitol. While Brittany and her movement had a legitimate grievance, that doesn't justify undermining the law. It becomes a form of vigilantism, rejecting legal outcomes in favor of personal judgement. This creates a dangerous slipper slope where personal conviction becomes the measure of legality, opening the door for bad-faith actors to exploit the same rationale to justify their destructive behavior. During the film, former President Barack Obama is shown responding to the grand jury's decision to not indict Darren Wilson. He condemns violent and unlawful reactions to the grand jury's decisions, a position I wholeheartedly agree with.

Although the film seems to be centered exclusively on the protests, I found it disappointing that it didn't explore other forms of activism that emerged in the wake of Brown's death. After watching the movie, I looked into the aftermath on my own and discovered that, despite lower voter turnout and registration rates, there were individuals and grassroots efforts encouraging people to vote. Highlighting these efforts, even briefly, would have provided a more complete picture of how one might seek to enact systemic reform. Another positive change that occurred was the investigation into the incident. According to NPR, the Department of Justice, under President Obama, confirmed what many residents had long believed: the city had incentivized the police to issue fines and fees in order to generate revenue for the city, disproportionately targeting black residents. The DOJ subsequently mandated a series of reforms for the department. Another promising development has been the appointment of Troy Doyle as Ferguson's chief of police. Among other reforms, he has prioritized rebuilding community trust

and diversifying the police force. At the time of Brown's death, only three officers in the department were black, something I noticed when rewatching the movie. Today, about half of the force is black. While this alone isn't enough, it is a meaningful step toward making the police feel like part of the community, rather than an outside force. This also reminds me of a widespread belief among many young adults today. They view the police as a whole as categorically evil. While I understand where the sentiment comes from, I believe it is misguided. Policing, as an institution, is a necessary part of modern society; even if it's often overfunded, while social programs that prevent crime are critically underfunded. The more constructive approach is to encourage people from within the community to join the force. Officers with shared lived experiences are more likely to understand local concerns and feel accountable to the people they serve.

In conclusion, while "Whose Streets?" left me disappointed, I'm happy that there have been real, measurable change.