

'Born again in Ferguson'

Unrest lured the Rev. Osagyefo Sekou away from the pulpit and into the streets 'in the communion of protest'

BY LEONORA KO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The Rev. Osagyefo Sekou — organizer, pastor, theologian and author — has found a new calling on the front lines of Ferguson and Baltimore.

Sekou was the Martin Luther King Scholar in Residence at Stanford University when he was sent to Ferguson, Mo., on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the country's oldest interfaith peace organization. Inspired by his experiences, he left the pulpit and has helped train 3,500 activists in civil disobedience, including protesters of the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Freddie Gray in Baltimore.

He is the author of numerous writings, "Gods, Gays and Guns: Essays on Religion and the Future of Democracy" and the forthcoming "Riot Music: British Hip Hop, Race and the Politics of Meaning."

We caught up with Sekou in advance of his arrival in Portland. He will be the keynote speaker at the free event "Race, Faith and Justice in the Age of Ferguson and Baltimore" from 7 to 9 p.m. June 29 at Warner Pacific College, 2219 SE 68th Ave. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Leonora Ko: *You've written about your experiences with racism. How did they shape you?*

Osagyefo Sekou: I do remember the first time I heard the word "n —." I was raised in the Arkansas delta. We were washing clothes at this Laundromat, and there was a pair that looked like me and my grandmother, a white boy and his mama. The boy goes, "Mommy, Mommy, look at the n —!" I had never heard the word before, but I knew by my grandmother's look that it was bad. So I started crying.

The lady says to my grandmother, "I'm so sorry. You know how kids are."

My grandmother said, "No, you taught him that," and then shook my arm and said, "Hush up, boy. I didn't run from them when they were lynching us, and I'm not going to start now."

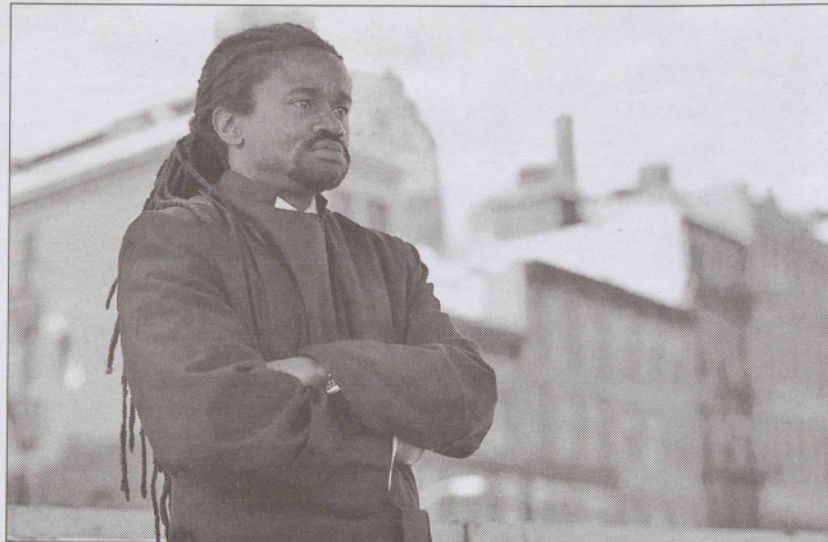
We were poor — but we were poor and dignified. And the lady, she was poor and undignified. She ran out of washing powder, and you could tell she was distraught. My grandmother walked over to her, gave her a brand-new box of washing powder, didn't say a word, and we walked out.

My grandmother said, "Boy, you speak truth with grace."

That's where I come from.

L.K.: *How do those experiences shape a person in general?*

O.S.: To be black in America is to be in a racist experience. ... You're always a slave in America. It is a state of being that we have never come to terms with. The dehumanization of black bodies is at work even though there has been some progress.



The Rev. Osagyefo Sekou went to Ferguson, Mo., on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the country's oldest interfaith peace organization.

PHOTO: KYLE DEPEW

The president of the United States is a black man but still has to deal with racist assaults.

At the same time, I come from an amazing community of poor, black, loving proletarians who were dignified. My grandma and community raised me and loved me; sometimes I feel like they loved me too much. So I live in a perpetual state of heartbreak because the world does not compare to their love.

L.K.: *You've said that the Ferguson unrest is a new movement. How is it different?*

O.S.: Ferguson is a new *moment* in the long struggle of black resistance. Black people have been resisting since we got off the boat. What's new is that it may be the first time since slave insurrections that poor, black proletarians are setting the terms of the national debate.

It looks different. It's queer, it's womanly and it's young. There are tattoos and former gang members.

It doesn't have much institutional support and has emerged outside the nonprofit industrial complex. Most of these organizations are new and are operating with limited resources. A new leadership has emerged that's effective.

L.K.: *Do you think the media misconstrued some of what happened (in Ferguson)?*

O.S.: I was there in the midst of it. Yes, there was the breaking of windows. Yes, there was some looting. But I also saw gang members stop people from looting. It's a wonder that every other day there's not a riot in America. We should be celebrating there's been so little property damage. The police are exacting violence on black communities with impunity. We ought to be celebrating these young people.

L.K.: *Did Ferguson change you?*

O.S.: I was born again in Ferguson. I saw the face of God, and God is an

angry, queer, black woman who's a single mother. It's one reason I made the transition out of the pulpit. So I'm in the streets where I'm trying to see what it means to be part of the sanctuary of the streets in the communion of protest.

L.K.: *When you look at the big picture, what role do the protests play?*

O.S.: Protests are thermostats. They set the political climate and create political space. Public policy and legislation are the thermometers that measure the political climate depending on what kind of "turn-up" has been in the streets.

In Ferguson, they specialize in the "turn-up" where they walk the street and shut it down at the drop of a dime. They're fearless.

Unfortunately, the state tends to only respond to violence. So kids protest all day nonviolently and then a few of them bust out some windows and the world starts paying attention. That's an indictment not of the young people; that's an indictment of the policymakers and the community. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Riots are the language of the unheard."

And again, the violence is primarily targeted at property. People's emphasis on the destruction of property is deeply problematic ... and speaks to a level of spiritual depravity on the part of the nation. "They broke windows. They broke windows." Like that's more important than leaving a baby (Michael Brown in Ferguson) left in the streets for 4 1/2 hours.

L.K.: *Some people are moved by "white guilt" to do something. Is there a more conscious way to be moved?*

O.S.: Guilt is such an unhelpful emotion ... and there's an obsession with "white allies" and "white privilege." I like to talk about "white supremacy," which is about a systematic formation. Not simply about individuals checking their privilege, but about ways in which we acknowledge the

systematic oppression of a people and the roles we play in it.

It begins with the acknowledgement that white folks have as much at stake spiritually as black people do. You get up every day and think the world's built for you. And then the bottom of the economy falls out. The system's working just fine, but it's working for just a few folks. In that sense, it puts white people in jeopardy, and humanity as well.

"We don't need allies; we need freedom fighters." This is me quoting the great Ruby Sales. She runs Spirithouse in Atlanta and is an old SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) organizer. Allies can check in and out. It's not their struggle. But freedom fighters put blood in the game. We're all morally culpable.

L.K.: *You've said that the queer and black revolutions are similar.*

O.S.: To be black is to be queer in America. It is to be at odds with the democracy. I wrote a piece called "Gays Are the New N—s," and I'm quoting Bayard Rustin. He was an openly gay black man who organized the March on Washington.

What's interesting about hegemony is that it's not terribly imaginative and uses four things: legislative repression, hypersexualized stereotypes, denial of access to home — whether it be home demolition or housing discrimination — and vigilante violence sanctioned by the state. These things were perfected on black bodies and play out on other groups. ... It happens to homeless people.

The liberal forces in each one of these communities share a sensibility that is about integrating into a system and not transforming it. To be a full citizen is to be willing to kill for the empire. This is the way African-Americans were integrated into the system. Harriet Tubman led the Union troops. "Don't ask, don't tell" is about integrating queer folks into a morally bankrupt system. The first sector of society to integrate is always the police force which is, "Are you willing to shed your blood for the empire?"

L.K.: *You're talking about not integrating, but rather transforming. How do you transform society?*

O.S.: Stay in the streets. We're just going to keep "turning up" until the level of inconvenience for the powers becomes unbearable and they have to do something because we won't go home.

L.K.: *Any final words?*

O.S.: There's a poem by Drew Dellinger where he talks about how he couldn't sleep because his great, great, great, great grandchildren woke him up, saying: The world was on fire, and what were you doing? And so I don't want them to wake me up.