

PUTIN' ON FOR DA LOU: HIP HOP'S RESPONSE TO RACISM IN ST. LOUIS

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## ABSTRACT

The brutal slaying of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 by Police Officer Darren Wilson is part of an endemic system of institutional racism against Blacks in St. Louis, Missouri. This system takes place in racialized spaces that entail disparate health care, failing schools, commercial redlining, an unjust justice system and several additional oppressive forces. I am seeking to understand the ways in which Hip Hop respond to these systems of oppression. I am interested in Hip Hop's response because Hip Hoppers are enduring racism. Further, Hip Hop's representation in popular culture draws attention to misogyny, drugs, violence and the glorification of money. Hip Hop scholars have already provided a significant amount of attention to debunking popular misconceptions and revealing that Hip Hop is so much more. I would like to add to this contribution by focusing on three emcees from St. Louis: Marcus Gray (Flame), Travis Tyler (Thi'sl), and Kareem Jackson (Tef Poe). Their unique background of being from St. Louis, couches them as local experts in which they are able to respond to the killing of Michael Brown, the continued oppressive conditions and localized disenfranchisement. Using a performance studies framework, which involves a focus on embodied behaviors and cultural transmission, this paper analyzes the repertoires of Flame's, Thi'sl's and Tef Poe's performances and activism. I contextualize their responses through a thorough examination of their background and their notions of the evils plaguing Ferguson. I argue that the three models of activism revealed by Flame's, Thi'sl's and Tef Poe's performances in response to the killing of Michael Brown present the ways in which Hip Hop artists respond to the killing of Michael Brown. This paper will explore Hip Hop's role within the larger Black freedom struggle.

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Every twenty-eight hours an African American is killed by a police officer, security guard or vigilante and the killer eventually walks free. The murdering of Black lives is a part of a much larger system that dehumanizes and devalues Black life. Systemic racism started with Englishmen seeing Africans' skin color, black, and identifying blackness as disgraceful. This perspective persisted through slavery and started the reinforcing cycle in the minds of Whites that Negroes are naturally inferior. Racism still thrives today.

Black wives, mothers, daughters and sisters are not respected as intelligent humans but regarded as ignorant and unable to take care of their families. Black husbands, fathers, sons and brothers are not seen as family members but thugs. The life expectancy for Black transgender women is thirty five years old.<sup>1</sup> Every time a Black body is slayed and the justice system sets the cop free, every time a Black person is incarcerated after being illegally searched and given a longer sentence than their peers who have the same record, every time a Black person is denied an interview because of their name and every time a building that is significant to African Americans, such as a Black church, is bombed and burned, the message that resonates loud and clear to Blacks in America is that Black lives do not matter!

On August 9, 2014, police officer Darren Wilson murdered unarmed Michael Brown, adding him to the countless number of Blacks murdered by police officers. On November 24, 2014, the grand jury decided not to indict Wilson for the killing. The killing of Michael Brown and the subsequent non-indictment of Wilson led to a volcanic reaction in which the tense feelings endured under the oppressive system of racism erupted and forced the country and many around the world to respond. Included within

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>, accessed July 5, 2014.

this response are three Hip Hop emcees from St. Louis: Marcus Gray (Flame), Kareem Jackson (Tef Poe), and Travis Tyler (Thi'sl). Popular representations of Hip Hop would lead to dismissing Hip Hop as a viable source to investigate. In fact, the popularization of the violent components of Hip Hop contributes to the understanding that Hip Hop perpetuates "black on black crime" which is a common response to the killing of Blacks by White police officers with the goal of shifting the blame. The most popular outlet to criticize Brown and connect him to Hip Hop is *New York Times* writer John Eligon.<sup>2</sup> He says that Brown "was no angel," and describes how he was a rapper who rapped "My favorite part is when the bodies hit the ground."<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to the section of Hip Hop, commercial Hip Hop, that promotes violence and the "black on black crime" myth which shifts responsibility away from Wilson, Hip Hop responded in different ways to Brown's killing. All three Hip Hop artists performed in Ferguson as a component of their activism. What they did on stage is shaped by their activism off stage. Therefore, their stage performances are a form of activism in and of itself. Charise Cheney, in "Representin' God: Rap, Religion and the Politics of a Culture" explains that a "raptivist" uses "an embodied-social politics to impart meaning and significance to past and present racial terrorism in American social, political, economic and cultural arenas."<sup>4</sup> Consistent with Cheney's definition of "raptivist," Flame, Thi'sl and

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<sup>2</sup> Eligon, John. "Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling With Problems and Promise." *The New York Times*. 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html>. accessed March 12, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> It appeared that Eligon did not aim to write a disparaging article about Brown's life.

<sup>4</sup> Charise Cheney, "Representin' God: Rap, Religion and the Politics of a Culture," *The North Star*:

A *Journal of African American Religious History* Volume 3, Number 1 (Fall 1999) pg. 1. Cheney is primarily focusing on Black nationalism and Hip Hop artists who align with the Nation of Islam. She explicates that they are critical of Christianity and puts forth a "masculinist agenda for empowerment" (pg. 2). I would like to expound upon this notion because there are more emcees who are dealing with racialized political issues and don't fall within the limits set by Cheney.



Tef Poe represent three types of raptivists. Flame is a “gospel centered raptivist” who held *Hope for Ferguson* which was a “buycott” and included a live concert. Thi’sl is a “x-hustling raptivist” who organized *Hope for the City* which involved a prayer meeting under the Arch in St. Louis and a concert. Tef Poe is a “revolutionary raptivist” who led protests, performed during *Ferguson October* and testified before the United Nations Committee Against Torture. Which leads to the question, how do Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s activism in Ferguson compare to each other? I argue that the activism in Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s performances not only responds to the killing of Michael Brown but also reveals important ways in which Hip Hop artists confront systemic and institutional racism.

## Literature Review

In describing racism and the long history of activism in response to racism by African Americans in general and Hip Hop artists in particular, scholars have given attention to the socio-historical and cultural dimensions that shape Hip Hoppers, the ways in which Hip Hop is a part of and can be used as a tool of activism, and how performances can be used to transmit culture and provide an identity for those who are a part of that culture. Particularly focusing on the epidemic of extrajudicial killings of Black people by police, security guards and vigilantes, Kevin Gray, Jeffrey St. Clair and JoAnn Wypijewski analyze George Zimmerman’s killing of Trayvon Martin in *Killing Trayvons*.<sup>5</sup> They argue that Zimmerman’s killing of Martin is more than an isolated incident; rather it is endemic of state sanctioned violence against people of color in America and around the world. This collection of essays frames the killing within a

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Gray, Jeffrey St. Clair and JoAnn Wypijewski, *Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence* (Petaluma, California: CounterPunch Books, 2014).

larger social and political context in which Florida represents that “state” that dehumanizes people of color around the world and Trayvon(s) represents those who are at the receiving end of the state’s drone. This anthology commemorates Martin through poems and short stories and calls for justice for his killing and all the “Trayvons” that are being killed around the world.

Numerous scholars have examined the ways in which Hip Hop has provided a voice to the voiceless and an opportunity to become conscious of institutional racism. Derrick Alridge, James Stewart and V.P. Franklin put forth an edited volume, *Message in the Music: Hip Hop History and Pedagogy* which grew out of the a Special Issue in *The Journal of African American History* “The History of Hip Hop,” published in 2005. In “The History of Hip Hop,” they argued that “it was necessary to view Hip Hop from within the African American cultural context and environment in which it emerged, developed, and evolved to fully understand its complexities and assess its potential benefit for current and future generations.”<sup>6</sup> Alridge, Stewart and Franklin then built on this in *Message in the Music* and include the perspectives of sociologists, historians, educators and literary critics. This expansive volume reveals how Hip Hop activists go in a different direction in fighting injustice than the leaders of the “Civil Rights Movement.” Hip Hop activist’s goal is to identify with those who were struggling with the real world problems of being poor, young and Black in America.

Charise Cheney also recognizes the socio-historical factors that engineered the making of Hip Hop. She contributes how Hip Hop can provide a voice for devalued youth in *Brothers Gonna Work it Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap*

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<sup>6</sup> Derrick P. Alridge, James Stewart and V.P. Franklin, “The History of Hip Hop,” in *Message in the Music: Hip Hop History and Pedagogy*, ed. Derrick P. Alridge et al. (Washington, D.C.: Asalh Press, 2010), 1.

*Nationalism*.<sup>7</sup> She positions Hip Hop artists within Black Nationalism and the “Golden Age of Rap Nationalism,” which ranges between 1988, with the release of Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, and 1993, with the release of Ice Cube’s *Lethal Injection*. Cheney argues that Hip Hop artists were able to bring together politics and music which empowered young African Americans in the struggle for freedom to create a message that transformed their minds and moved their bodies.<sup>8</sup>

Andreana Clay enters the conversation by analyzing, in *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back*, how the socio-historical context of the twenty-first century, infused by the dissatisfaction with the “Civil Rights Movement,”<sup>9</sup> intervened in the making of youth of color’s identity and notions of activism.<sup>10</sup> She acted as a participant observer in two non-profit teen organizations, Teen Justice and Multicultural Alliance, and conducted interviews with twenty-one youth from these two organizations. She contends that their activism is constantly “in the shadow” of previous models of activism. Clay reveals that Hip Hop provides an identity when the world they are living in tells them they are worthless and new role models who “keep it real.” Clay reveals how Hip Hop functions as a bridge to mobilize youth across racial, gender and sexuality barriers to fight against social injustice.

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<sup>7</sup> Charise Cheney Brothers, *Gonna Work it Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pg. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Several scholars have questioned the conventional notion of the Civil Rights Movement being confined to the South and the period of 1954 – 1968. The most popular article is Jacquelyn Hall’s “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” in the *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005). Further, Thomas Sugrue highlights the fight for civil rights in the North in *Sweet Land of Liberty*. Clay follows the traditional pattern by describing how the teenagers responded to Martin Luther King Jr., also mentioning Fannie Lou Hamer, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congress of Racial Equality.

<sup>10</sup> Andreana Clay, *The Hip-Hop Generation Fights Back* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire* and Richard Schechner in *Performance Studies* among several other scholars have argued that what constitutes “performance” is debatable and still open for definition. To provide some basis for common ground, Taylor identifies that performance “constitutes the object/process of analysis in performance studies, that is, the many practices and events – dance, ritual, political rallies, funerals – that involved theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event appropriate behaviors.”<sup>11</sup> She goes on to say that performance is also the method that is used to analyze the event. Therefore, performance is both an analytical tool for obtaining knowledge and the actual entity being evaluated.

Schechner contributes to an understanding of performance as focusing on embodied behaviors rather than “objects” or “things.” These behaviors are recognized as having “liveness,” denoting transformability and not staying static.<sup>12</sup> Joseph Roach, in *Cities of the Dead*, explicates this even further. He argues that performance is concurrent with memory and history. He states:

Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements as mnemonic reserves, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in the silences between them), and imaginary movements dreamed in minds not prior to language but constitutive of it.<sup>13</sup>

According to Roach, the key component in which knowledge of cultural practices is passed on is surrogation. Roach defines it as “a process by which culture produces and re-creates itself.”<sup>14</sup>

Greg Dimitriadis builds on Schechner’s notion of “liveness” and analyzes how performing Hip Hop provides an identity for marginalized youth in *Performing*

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<sup>11</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 2

*Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*. He conducted focus groups and interviews of youth between the ages of seven and eighteen at a local community center in Mississippi. He contends that these youth perform Hip Hop “texts” in their daily lives. Dimitriadis describes text as the music, movies and t-shirts that involve symbolic systems which “we invest and reinvest with value and meaning in particular times and places for particular ends and purposes.”<sup>15</sup> Since texts include symbol systems and lived experiences, performing Hip Hop entails the continual and active construction of identity by bringing together the socio-historical conditions that impact a certain community with the culture that is created within that community.

The Special Issue “All Hail the Queens: A Queer Feminist Recalibration of Hip Hop Scholarship” in *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* also conceptualizes Hip Hop in a performance studies framework and adds in feminist and queer theories. Jessica Pabón and Shanté Paradigm Smalls edited “All Hail the Queens.” In this boundary breaking issue, their goal was to “radically alter how scholars teach hip hop,” and “and how society at large values hip hop as not just an aesthetic practice, but a social and political one.”<sup>16</sup> They reveal that Hip Hop, feminist and queer groups each have “ways of struggle” that is not experienced separately but by those who fit within all three groups. Particularly focusing on Hip Hop, feminism and performance, Imani Johnson’s article “From Blues Women to B-Girls: Performing Badass Femininity,” explains how B-girls on stage performances provide a space for

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<sup>15</sup> Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Jessica N. Pabón and Shanté Paradigm Smalls “Critical Intimacies: Hip Hop as Queer Feminist Pedagogy,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24 (2014): 3.

“badass” femininity which challenges gender norms.<sup>17</sup> She states: “I define badass femininity as a performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded of ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman’s strength.”<sup>18</sup> It is during b-girl performances that women are able to present the complexities of their identity.

## **Method and Outline**

My two methodological approaches consist of being a participant observer in Ferguson and using a performance studies theoretical framework to analyze the three performances of Thi’sl, Tef Poe and Flame. Richard Schechner and Diane Taylor heavily influence my understanding of performance theory. I view Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s performances as a stage play and examine the songs they chose to perform, and the order in which they performed the songs. My overall goal is to understand the ways in which the collection of the songs and the messages spoken in between the songs create an overarching theme that communicates their answers to the killing of Michael Brown. In order to substantiate my analysis of their performances, I listened to their albums, watched videos of their other performances and music videos, gathered information from interviews, followed their posts on social media and reviewed their written works. I attempted to contact each artist for an interview but I was unsuccessful. Thi’sl responded to two of my questions over Twitter.

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<sup>17</sup> “B-Girls” is the title of women break dancers in Hip Hop and one of the four original elements of Hip Hop.

<sup>18</sup> Imani K. Johnson, “From Blues Women to B-Girls: Performing Badass Femininity,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24 (2014): 20

October 10 – 13, 2014, *Hands Up United, Organization for Black Struggle, Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment* and partners in Ferguson organized Ferguson October. Ferguson October, a “weekend of resistance,” involved marches, meetings and panels with the goal of sustaining the momentum in response to Michael Brown’s killing and making the movement spread nationwide. I went to Ferguson and attended this event. I arrived the morning of October 12 and attended Greater St. Mark Missionary Baptist Church. I chose this church because they provided a first aid shelter for Ferguson protestors. During the service I took notes and after the service I interviewed some of the attendees. I then visited Canfield Apartments to see the memorial and where Brown’s body had lain. I also spoke to some of the residents. After visiting Canfield, I drove around the city and patronized some of the stores that were impacted by the uprising. On Sunday night, I attended the mass protest service in which Tef Poe spoke. Lastly, I went to the scheduled protest location for Vonderitt Myers but the St. Louis Police Department was already there and prevented us from protesting. It is this experience that shapes my view of activism and the Ferguson situation as a whole.

The influence of Schechner led me to Victor Turner’s theory of social drama. It is this theory that I will use to organize this paper. Turner lived among the Ndembu people in Zambia from 1950 to 1954. From his ethnographic research, Turner developed the theory of social drama. He defines social drama as “units of aharmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations.”<sup>19</sup> Social drama progresses through four phases: Breach – Crisis – Redressive Action – Reintegration or Schism. A disruptive incident gives rise to a potentially dangerous situation to the social unit and culminates in a

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<sup>19</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37

breach. The crisis then widens the breach, revealing the issue to the public. The redressive action is the action taken to address the crisis. The performances by Tef Poe, Flame and Thi'sl, occurred during this phase. The reintegration/schism is the resolution of the breach which repairs the broken aspects of the society, or a schism occurs.

Turner's theory of social drama fits within his argument that the disciplines of sociology and anthropology have inadequately identified "society" with "structure" and have not recognized "anti-structure."<sup>20</sup> He defines structure as a "superorganic arrangement of parts or positions that continues, with modifications more or less gradual, through time."<sup>21</sup> Structure is automatically associated with conflict, has a "cognitive quality" and is characterized by a classification system which assigns and orders people into certain roles.<sup>22</sup> Turner believes that the appropriate conceptualization of "society" is "that the social has a free or unbound as well as a bonded or bound dimension, the dimension of *communitas* in which men confront one another not as role players but as 'human totals,' integral beings who recognizantly share the same humanity."<sup>23</sup> *Communitas* is Turner's idealized notion of community. It goes beyond the cognitive boundaries of structure and involves the whole human.

*Communitas* is a "universal and boundless" community "flowing from I to Thou."<sup>24</sup> Equalitarianism thrives in this community. Turner describes that *communitas* can mold into three forms: existential or spontaneous *communitas*, normative *communitas* or

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pg. 54

<sup>21</sup> Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, reprint 2008), 126.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 127 and *Dramas*, 234.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, *Dramas*, 269.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 263 and *Rituals*, 127.



ideological *communitas*. Spontaneous *communitas* may “arise unpredictably at any time between human beings who are institutionally reckoned or defined as members of any or all kinds of social groupings, or of none.”<sup>25</sup> Normative *communitas* is when spontaneous *communitas* organizes into a “perduring social system.”<sup>26</sup> Ideological *communitas* is “a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential *communitas*.”<sup>27</sup>

Since *communitas* is anti-structure, Turner posits that it emerges “where social structure is not”: “liminality,” “outsiderhood,” and “structural inferiority.”<sup>28</sup> Liminality is a major component of Turner’s argument. He appropriated the term from Arnold van Gennep’s formulation of *rites de passage* which includes three phases: separation, margin or limen and reintegration.<sup>29</sup> The second phase is identified as the liminal period. Therefore, liminality is when individuals or groups are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”<sup>30</sup> Outsiderhood involves those outside the social system and the marginalized. Structural inferiority includes those that are at the lower level of the social system.

I am not arguing in support of Turner’s critique of sociology and anthropology, but Turner does provide a means of identifying conscious agents in society and a lens through which to view a marginalized group coming together in response to a crisis. The *communitas* that was present after Brown was killed among a group of marginalized Black people in Ferguson cannot be denied. Additionally, I recognize that Turner’s

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<sup>25</sup> Turner, *Rituals*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 132

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>28</sup> Turner, *Dramas*, 231 and *Rituals*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, *Rituals*, 94.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, *Rituals*, 95.

social drama theory may lead to oversimplification. I am using the framework to focus on the course of events in Ferguson in order to set up a chronological pattern. Actually, Blacks having been fighting for freedom since the shores of Africa. Vincent Harding contends that:

[I]t was only in the context of the ongoing movement of black struggle, changing and yet continuing, that we could speak adequately of black radicalism. Now I understand it as that element of the movement that at any given moment in our history develops the most fundamental challenge to the social, economic, political, spiritual, or intellectual domination of white people and their power over black lives.<sup>31</sup>

Harding is arguing for a holistic understanding of the Black freedom struggle. Focusing on particular movements within the Black freedom struggle, such as the “post-Civil Rights Movement,” is too myopic and does not connect contemporary struggles with the long history of freedom fighters or racialized injustice. This perspective also devalues the African influence on African American aesthetics. I start the first phase of the conflict in Ferguson, the breach, with the American Housing Act of 1949, but racialized attitudes about Blackness are discoverable as early as 1550.<sup>32</sup>

## **Breach – Institutional and Systemic Racism in Ferguson, MO**

In Schechner’s description of the breach, he says, “underlying every drama, there is some kind of fault line.”<sup>33</sup> The breach in Ferguson, Missouri is the “color line.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1981), xx.

<sup>32</sup> Winthrop Jordan provides extensive details about Europeans’ conceptions of Africans in *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550 – 1812*. He cites travel accounts such as Richard Hakluyt’s *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*. He states that English travelers arrived to West Africa after 1550 (pg. 3). From these accounts, Jordan details how Whites began to develop negative stereotypical views of Negroes.

<sup>33</sup>Richard Schechner “Performance Studies: An Introduction - Victor Turner's Social Drama” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pnsw5xFuXHE>, December 17, 2012 accessed December 17, 2014

<sup>34</sup> W.E.B. DuBois in the *Souls of Black Folks* states that: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” It is the color line that parallels “Black places” which I provide more information on.

Ferguson is essentially a “Black place,” what several scholars identify as a racialized urban landscape.<sup>35</sup> Clarissa Hayward, in *How Americans Make Race*, argues that institutionally and systematically racialized spaces were created.<sup>36</sup> These racialized spaces have similar characteristics: poor educational systems, high unemployment, low job availability, poverty, over policing, commercial redlining, pollution, disparate healthcare and subpar housing.<sup>37</sup> Hayward identifies these as “collective problems” shifted away from society as a whole so that they = became the “problems of ‘black places’.”<sup>38</sup> This is precisely what happened with the Pruitt Igoe project in St. Louis between 1950 and the mid 1970’s, and eventually spread to Ferguson.

Under President Harry Truman, Congress passed the American Housing Act of 1949 with the purpose of addressing the national housing shortage.<sup>39</sup> This act provided federal funding for the City of St. Louis, to build the Pruitt Igoe public housing projects, which eventually became nationally known as violent and dysfunctional. However, the documentary “Pruitt–Igoe Myth” argues that the City of St. Louis bears much of the responsibility because failed to properly maintain the buildings, leading to their implosion in 1972.<sup>40</sup> The destruction of the Pruitt–Igoe buildings in displaced lower income Blacks and they began to migrate to specific suburbs; one was Ferguson. The

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<sup>35</sup> Clarissa Hayward, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014). Several other scholars have analyzed racialized spaces including but not limited to Lance Freeman in *There Goes the ‘Hood* and the edited volume by Robert Bullard *The Black Metropolis in the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>36</sup> Hayward explains that racialized narratives rendering Blacks inferior became institutionalized through the construction of the Black ghetto and White reclusive spaces. These stories were spread systemically through science and individually through families and friends. The state systematically channeled investments through subsidies into White suburbia away from Blacks which made these spaces more attractive to Whites. The channeling of resources toward White places left Blacks spaces lacking in equitable resources.

<sup>37</sup> *The Black Metropolis* goes into detail discussing these characteristics.

<sup>38</sup> Hayward, *How Americans Make Race*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Committee on Banking and Currency United States Senate, *Housing Act of 1949*, <https://bulk.resource.org/gao.gov/81-171/00002FD7.pdf> accessed, December 17, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> *The Pruitt–Igoe Myth: An Urban History*, dir. Chad Freidrichs, 83 min., 2011

1970 census reports that Negroes only made up approximately 1.5% of Ferguson population.<sup>41</sup> The 1980 census reported the Black population increased to approximately 14%.<sup>42</sup>

“Restrictive covenants” were another factor in the creation of racialized spaces in St. Louis. When the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) only offered financing and insurance to Whites, the result was formation of “White places,” enforced by “eminent domain,” exclusionary zoning ordinances, blockbusting and racial steering.<sup>43</sup> Richard Rothstein provides details about these practices in the publication “The Making of Ferguson,” especially blockbusting and zoning ordinances.<sup>44</sup> Racial steering may also have occurred but is harder to prove. Rothstein describes a case that occurred in the White suburb of Affton. In 1981, a developer attempted to create subsidized housing but a group protested to the St. Louis County Planning Commission requesting rezoning against multi-family housing. The council voted six to one to ban multi-family housing. Affton is currently 91% White.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *1970 Census of Population and Housing: St. Louis, MO*, <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/39204513p18ch09.pdf>, 1972.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *1970 Census of Population and Housing: St. Louis, MO*, <https://archive.org/stream/1980censusofpo8023131unse#page/93/mode/1up>,

<sup>43</sup> Richard Rothstein in the publication “The Making of Ferguson,” argues that institutional racism led to the spatial segregation of Whites and Blacks in St. Louis. Restrictive covenants are private agreements that prevent Blacks from buying in that particular area. Eminent domain is the taking over of private land for public purposes. Blockbusting is a real estate practice in which realtor will organize Blacks to appear “Black” by creating false for sale signs and advertisements in the newspaper and then indicating to White residents they should leave. Racial steering is another practice by realtor to mislead potential buyers to certain areas.

<sup>44</sup> These practices and laws were found unconstitutional starting around the 1950’s. What is not clear is the impact they had on racialized spaces. It is hard to monitor individual actions and can be argued that some of these practices persisted although they are unconstitutional.

<sup>45</sup> City-Data.com, *Affton, MO*, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Affton-Missouri.html#b>, accessed December 17, 2014

By 1990, the Ferguson population was approximately 73% White and 25% Black showing a continual increase in Black growth.<sup>46</sup> Two White suburbs in 1995, Wildwood and Green Park, adopted zoning ordinances prohibiting multifamily buildings which prevented use of Section 8 vouchers in those areas. Additionally, in 1995, an article in the St. Louis Times Dispatch discussed blockbusting. Rothstein explicates how speculators purchased houses on blocks they wanted to “bust.” They would allow houses to deteriorate, causing depreciating home values in that neighborhood and alarming Whites to move out. Next, they would sell the depreciated values at inflated prices to Blacks.

By 2010, the population transformed to 29.27% White and 67.43% Black, which is close to current demographics.<sup>47</sup> In addition to zoning ordinances and blockbusting, St. Louis experienced gentrification. Thi’sl discussed this in an interview with Wade Harris (DJ Wade O). Thi’sl was on a panel that included college professors and a “lady who works close with a section 8 worker.”<sup>48</sup> Thi’sl explained how seven to nine years ago, the City of St. Louis planned on rejuvenating decimated areas of the city. A realtor warned him to buy property. Thi’sl researched and discovered that property cost around \$1,000 due to its dilapidated conditions.

Further, Thi’sl shared the conversation between “the lady” and the Section 8 worker. She lived in Dellwood which adjoins Ferguson. “The lady” stated: “I need you to move. We are about to start sweeping all of the trash out of that way.”<sup>49</sup> This statement

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<sup>46</sup>United States Census Bureau, “Ferguson, MO,” <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cp1/cp-1-27.pdf>, accessed November 21, 2014.

<sup>47</sup>Ferguson, Missouri Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts <http://censusviewer.com/city/MO/Ferguson>, accessed November 21, 2014.

<sup>48</sup>Wade Harris, *Full Interview with Thi’sl*, August 25/15, <http://wadeoradio.com/full-interview-with-thisl/>, accessed December 20, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

is indicative of institutional racism and the creation of racialized spaces. The history of Section 8 vouchers and current demographics substantiates Thi'sl's story. The City of St. Louis and realtors moved low income Blacks to Ferguson and other "Black places" in the suburbs while Whites migrated to the city.<sup>50</sup>

Thi'sl also described the composition of Ferguson. He stated that Ferguson divides between historic downtown area, which is mostly White, and the side adjacent to Dellwood which is mostly Black. Brown was killed in the Black space bordering Dellwood. Housing distinguishes the locale neighboring Dellwood from historic downtown. Whereas historic downtown Ferguson has "nice houses" according to Thi'sl, housing in the "Black space" are apartment complexes which resonate with the quality of St. Louis' public housing.

Another component of Ferguson as a "Black place" is commercial redlining. Robert Bullard, in *The Black Metropolis in the Twenty-First Century*, describes commercial redlining as businesses intentionally avoiding Black spaces and targeting White spaces. Thi'sl also described historic downtown Ferguson as having food markets. This area is named the Ferguson Special Business District (FSBD).<sup>51</sup> Alongside the FSBD is the Ferguson Citywalk. Businesses concentrated downtown do not spread into the vicinity of Ferguson contiguous with Dellwood. During my visit, I drove around and the atmosphere was completely different in the two racialized spaces. The FSBD was much cleaner than the area surrounding Canfield Apartments. The

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<sup>50</sup> A December 9, 2014 article from the St. Louis Dispatch "End the diabolical cycle of prejudice and reprisal" discusses white flight and blockbusting providing contemporary evidence that this is still happening.

<sup>51</sup>City of Ferguson, "Ferguson Special Business District," <https://www.fergusoncity.com/136/Ferguson-Special-Business-District-FSBD>, accessed December 18, 2014.

differences between the two areas were much more than the result of the uprising in response to Brown's murder.

In addition to commercial redlining, "Black Ferguson" endures major health concerns. The air quality is 63.7 out of 100 while the nation is 93.9.<sup>52</sup> The publication "Where We Stand," released September 2014 reports: "St. Louis has one of the highest infant mortality gaps with blacks being 3.6 times more likely than whites to die during infancy."<sup>53</sup> Although the publication analyzes St. Louis as a whole, the results are still indicative of Ferguson.

The region of Ferguson close to Dellwood experiences poverty due to high unemployment rates and job sprawl. The unemployment rate for Blacks in Ferguson is 13%.<sup>54</sup> The inability to obtain a job may be a result of job sprawl which is defined, according to Michael Stoll, as "a dimension of concentration and centralization of employment activity within and across metropolitan areas."<sup>55</sup> Blacks have fewer opportunities to obtain employment and have to travel a farther distance to work. Moreover, Blacks receive unequal employment training from the educational system.

Nationally, Black children are three times more likely than White children to be suspended.<sup>56</sup> In the Ferguson-Florissant school district, 20.5% of the Black students

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<sup>52</sup>Sperlings Best Places, *Ferguson, Missouri*,  
<http://www.bestplaces.net/health/city/missouri/ferguson>, accessed December 17, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Where We Stand, *Racial Segregation and Disparity, 6th Edition, Update 9 September 2014*  
<http://www.ewgateway.org/pdf/files/newsletters/WWS/WWS6EdNo9.pdf>, accessed December 17, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Brookings, "Ferguson, Mo. Emblematic of Growing Suburban Poverty,"  
<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/the-avenue/posts/2014/08/15-ferguson-suburban-poverty>,  
accessed December 17, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Michael A. Stoll, "Spatial Mismatch and Job Sprawl," in *The Black Metropolis in the Twenty-First Century: Race, Power, and Politics of Place*, ed Robert D. Bullard (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 129.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, *Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline*, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>,  
accessed December 18, 2014.

were suspended while 7.2% of White students were suspended.<sup>57</sup> Further, the reasons for suspension were not based on violent behavior or drug use but “disruptive behavior and attendance.”<sup>58</sup> In addition to over and disproportionately suspending Blacks, many of the schools face accreditation issues. In St. Louis Post-Dispatch article “Poverty and Academic Struggle Go Hand-in-Hand,” Elisa Crouch and Walker Moskop reveal that the school systems in Ferguson that are primarily attended by Blacks are poorly performing schools. In Ferguson-Florissant school district, there are 12 provisionally accredited and non-accredited schools.

The St. Louis police departments, especially Ferguson police department, and the 91 municipal courts surrounding Ferguson severely impact Blacks. The militarized Ferguson police department exemplifies a larger network of the militarization of American police officers. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released a report “War Comes Home,” which indicated “American policing has become unnecessarily and dangerously militarized, in large part through federal programs that have armed state and local law enforcement agencies with the weapons and tactics of war, with almost no public discussion or oversight.”<sup>59</sup> Police departments around the country militarized in part in order to fight the War on Drugs but also because the Army offered weapons and vehicles not needed in Iraq to local police departments; for example the tanks that were given to the Ferguson Police department.

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<sup>57</sup>Rishawn Biddle, *Ferguson Shows Why School Discipline Matters*, August 14, 2014 <http://dropoutnation.net/2014/08/august-14/ferguson-shows-why-school-discipline-matters/> accessed December 18, 2014. This included both in-school and out of school suspensions.

<sup>58</sup> Battle, *Ferguson Shows Why School Discipline Matters*, August 14, 2014

<sup>59</sup> American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing*, June 2014, <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/jus14-warcomeshome-report-web-rel1.pdf>, 2.



The report discussed the negative impact of militarized police forces on communities of color. These operations disproportionately confront people of color, granted they are minorities in population: “42 percent of people impacted by a SWAT deployment to execute a search warrant were Black and 12 percent were Latino. This means that of the people impacted by deployments for warrants, at least 54 percent were minorities.”<sup>60</sup> The murdering of innocent people tragically results from SWAT operations. Brown’s murder was not an outcome of a SWAT raid but the aggressive behavior of police officer Wilson and the subsequent response to the protestors were characteristics of SWAT procedures.

The Ferguson police department utilized military tactics on peaceful protestors including tear gassing, shooting rubber bullets, flares and smoke. The site of Ferguson police officers fully dressed in body armor, helmets, goggles, and holding a 12-gauge shotgun, while riding in an armored vehicle could strike fear and intimidation into the people of Ferguson. Additionally, the people of Ferguson contend with a militarized police force that harasses them daily with constant surveillance, racial profiling and ticketing.

On April 24, 2013, one year and four months before Brown’s killing; St. Louis police murdered Cary Ball.<sup>61</sup> His story is very similar to Brown’s; the cops said he fired at them and they had to protect their lives. Those who knew Ball shared that he had a 3.8 grade point average and questioned the likelihood of Bell having a gun.<sup>62</sup> They were

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Valerie Hahn, “St. Louis Police Identify Man Killed After he Pointed Gun at Officers,” 4/25/13, [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-police-identify-man-killed-after-he-pointed-gun/article\\_4e4b662f-0ada-5f10-886d-de3ca89e9031.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-police-identify-man-killed-after-he-pointed-gun/article_4e4b662f-0ada-5f10-886d-de3ca89e9031.html).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, Tom Kenyon said this in the comments section: “BALL DID NOT FIRE ONE SHOT. Wow. The cops were defending themselves? with 25 shots? it was pretty clear that they were PURSUING Cary Ball. I don’t believe for a second that Ball A) was driving erratically [he probably

also very aware that police officers disproportionately police Blacks. The Ferguson police department racially profiles Blacks. The 94% White Ferguson police department is almost seven times more likely to stop and eleven times more likely to search Black motorists than Whites.<sup>63</sup> Further, Blacks accounted for 93% of the arrests in 2013. This is problematic because when police officers conducted searches, Whites had contraband more than a third of the time while Blacks only had contraband a fifth of the time. Police stops and ticketing starts a “snowball effect” that culminates in going to jail.

Radley Balko in “How municipalities in St. Louis County, Mo. Profit from Poverty,” details this process and explains that at least 40% of some municipalities’ revenues come from fines. He argues that this motivates police officers to find infractions. He shares the story of Nicole Bolden, who, after being in an accident in Florissant in which she was not at fault, went to jail for two weeks. Bolden had four arrest warrants for failure to appear in traffic court in three different towns, Florissant and Hazelwood in St. Louis County and Foristell in St. Charles County. Bolden tells the story:

The Florissant officer first took Bolden to the jail in that town, where Bolden posted a couple hundred dollars bond and was released at around midnight. She was next taken to Hazelwood and held at the jail there until she could post a second bond. That was another couple hundred dollars. She wasn’t released from her cell there until around 5 p.m. the next day. Exhausted, stressed, and still worried about what her kids had seen, she was finally taken to the St. Charles County jail for the outstanding warrant in Foristell. Why the county jail? Because the tiny town of 500 isn’t large enough to have its own holding cell, even though it does have a mayor, a board of aldermen, a municipal court and a seven-member police department. It’s probably best known

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accidentally hit a vehicle, and didn’t want to get arrested for owning a gun] B) pointed his gun at the police officers [a 3.86 GPA student is not that dumb; the cops probably just knew he had it, maybe they saw it]. For some reason, many Americans believe statements made by professional murderers-- and will always defer judgement to “a trained professional”.

Don’t expect justice from the Circuit Attorney’s office; they work hand in hand with the cops. Their “investigation” will probably consist of a few chats over coffee with the STL police chief, to see how much he wants to participate in this cover-up.

THE LEAST that can be done for Ball and his family is the removal of these two officers from the police force--I’m sure they won’t have a problem finding another job. as for putting them on trial, that won’t happen. only God can give them their final judgement.”

<sup>63</sup>Missouri Attorney General, *Racial Profiling Data*, 2013, <http://ago.mo.gov/docs/default-source/public-safety/2013agencyreports.pdf?sfvrsn=2>, accessed December 16, 2014.

locally for the speed trap its police set along I-70.

Bolden's story is the story of many other Blacks in "Black places" in St. Louis.

Specifically in Ferguson, the 2013 – 2014 City of Ferguson Annual Operating Budget stated: "Due to a more concentrated focus on traffic enforcement, municipal court revenues have risen about 44% or \$623,000 from those in FY 2010-2011."<sup>64</sup> This denies Blacks of their humanity and makes them only good for paying fines to finance the town. These are the factors that lead to the next phase, the crisis.

### **Crisis – Killing of Michael Brown**

The crisis in Ferguson that revealed the color line to the rest of the world was the killing of Michael Brown. After Brown was murdered by Wilson, his bloody body laid helpless and discarded akin to an animal for more than four hours.<sup>65</sup> Schechner explains that there could be more crises that widen the breach. In addition to Brown's murder, two Black males were killed by St. Louis police officers. Two miles away and ten days later, St. Louis police officers killed Kajeime Powell. Then on October 8, 2014, a White male police officer killed Vonderrit Myers. Both of these Black males, supposedly, were armed, but based on the video of Powell's murder and the testimony of Myers' mother, the officers' claims are highly questionable.

Blacks in Ferguson endure a poor educational system, pollution, poverty and police officers that murder; the epitome of institutional and systemic racism and a strong

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<sup>64</sup> City of Ferguson Missouri, *Annual Operation Budget*, 2013-2014, <http://www.fergusoncity.com/DocumentCenter/View/1609>, accessed December 22, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> All of the major news outlets including St. Louis Dispatch, who provided the most comprehensive details, report that shots were fired around 12:02 pm and he was checked in to the morgue at 4:37 pm. [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/why-was-michael-brown-s-body-left-there-for-hours/article\\_0b73ec58-c6a1-516e-882f-74d18a4246e0.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/why-was-michael-brown-s-body-left-there-for-hours/article_0b73ec58-c6a1-516e-882f-74d18a4246e0.html)

declaration that Black lives don't matter. The next phase is the redressive action phase, which brings in Turner's notions of liminality and *communitas*.

## **Redressive Action – Hip Hop Performances**

Blacks in Ferguson, and arguably Blacks in America, are in a liminal state. They are “betwixt and between” systemic oppression and the Black freedom struggle. In this state, African American culture is creating and recreating itself. African Americans also fit into Turner's “outsiderhood,” and to an extent, “structural inferiority.” liminal states are times of shifting, questioning, transformation and creation. It is in this space that the aesthetics of Flame's, Thi'sl's and Tef Poe's activism emerges. All three come from the 'hoods of St. Louis, but all have gone down divergent paths.

Turner's formulation helps to explain how their paths have influenced their activism. He states that during the redressive action phase “members of the disturbed social system” respond with redressive “mechanisms” to the crisis.<sup>66</sup> He also explains that there are different types of mechanisms used to respond to the crisis based on several factors, “the depth and shared social significance of the breach, the social inclusiveness of the crisis, the nature of the social group within which the breach took place, and the degree of its autonomy with reference to wider or external systems of social relations.”<sup>67</sup>

## **Applicable Components of Hip Hop**

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<sup>66</sup> Turner, *Dramas*, 39.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 39 The primary group to respond were disenfranchised Blacks who endured the most from the breach and was hit the hardest by Brown's killing. The crisis created a tense and highly charged atmosphere that exploded and created something dynamic. This group started protesting on August 9 and had not stopped protesting by October 12 during #FergusonOctober. Some members of this group may have been a part of a normative *communitas* before the death but after the death, they formed a spontaneous *communitas*.

Hip Hop is central to Flame's, Thi'sl's and Tef Poe's identity and ideology. While the identification of all African Americans within Turner's outsiderhood is debatable, the position of Hip Hop within this group is not. Turner defines outsiderhood as:

The condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role playing members of that system.

External representations of Blackness mark outsiders. The visual representations of Hip Hop are associated with criminality in American society. Hip Hoppers' "body markings," clothes, jewelry, hairstyle and tattoos, are usually associated with demeaning stereotypes.<sup>68</sup> Racialized bodies of Hip Hop emcees embody observers' notions of inferiority. Hip Hoppers are characterized as thugs, violent, hyper-sexualized and ignorant.<sup>69</sup>

Flame, Thi'sl and Tef Poe were born into Hip Hop culture but they chose to perform this identity in the way their lives and their activism defy demeaning stereotypes. All three emcees can live as upstanding citizens and be active in their community, but still be identified as a racialized other. Once the police officer spotted Flame's fitted hat, once the White female at the church Thi'sl was a guest speaking saw he was a tall Black male and once someone sees Poe's tattoo on his wrist, their actual identity does not matter. Thi'sl provides one of the most telling examples of the discrimination he has received because of how he looks. In an interview with DJ Wade O on the Wade O

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<sup>68</sup> Glenn Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> I recognize that part of this association is due to some songs and videos that portray this issue. I am pointing out that every Hip Hop emcee and Hip Hopper do not fit this category. Further, some emcees are presenting a character that does not actually represent who they are.

Radio show, he shared a story about a police officer who pulled up at 2:00 in the afternoon and asked “what are you doing here” in front of his own house.<sup>70</sup>

Thi’sl’s story exemplifies how some level of class success does not immunize them from being racially profiled. Therefore, Robin Kelley’s notion of “infrapolitics” can be applied to Flame, Thi’sl and Tef Poe as Black men and their Hip Hop performances. Kelley states that infrapolitics “describe the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements.”<sup>71</sup> Kelley argues that attention should be on how people are political and not why. From this perspective, “economic well-being, safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of daily life” should be considered political.<sup>72</sup> As a result, the very act and essence of Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s artistic expressions are political. They defy the encumbering stigmas about Hip Hop emcees. Flame’s snapback hat, Thi’sl’s gritty delivery and Tef Poe’s t-shirt proclaim their identity as Hip Hop emcees and their boldness to identify as Hip Hop, even when the world devalues that identity.

In addition to Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Poe’s Hip Hop identity revealing their implicit activism, their involvement with Hip Hop also shows how their culture and artistic expression is characterized by Schechner’s notion of “liveness” and is passed on from generation to generation as explained by Roach’s conception of surrogation. Emcees are central to Hip Hop culture and are primarily responsible for the transmission of the culture. Hip Hop artist, songwriter and producer Clayton Gavin, also known as Khnum

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<sup>70</sup> Wade Harris, *Full Interview with Thi’sl*, August 25/15, <http://wadeoradio.com/full-interview-with-thisl/>, accessed December 20, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 8

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

“Stic” Ibomu, elucidates the importance of the emcee. In his book *The Art of Emceeing*, he states:

An emcee is a creator, innovator, communicator, orator, translator, teacher, visionary, representative, thinker, convincer, speaker, story teller, messenger, poet, griot, a writer, master of ceremonies, historian, leader, reporter, a vocal instrument, philosopher, fan, an observer, a student, therapist, social analyst, evangelist, a minister, a professor, sales person, motivator, mack, chalmers, host, and artist all in one!<sup>73</sup>

Stic illuminates that emcees are multi-dimensional. They skillfully and smoothly move along a spectrum of identities in and out of the streets and the church, the corner and the classroom, the hood and national television and the studio and the stage.

Since Flame, Thi’sl and Tef Poe are emcees, they are designated as the receptors/transmitters of Hip Hop culture.<sup>74</sup> Their reception of Hip Hop started in their childhood and was influenced by the emcees they listened to growing up, the rap battles they had in their hoods in St. Louis, the music videos they watched, the parties they went to and the concerts they were a part of. Thi’sl raps:

*It was all a dream  
I used to read The Source magazine  
Watching Biggie and P Diddy on the TV  
Screen  
Thinking that could be me*

Thi’sl actually samples some words from Christopher “Notorious B.I.G./Biggie Smalls” Wallace’s song “Juicy” by maintaining *It was all a dream* and changing the magazine from *Word Up* to *The Source*. This shows his familiarity with the various aspects of Hip Hop culture, both of the magazines, Black Entertainment Television and the life of Hip Hop artists Biggie Smalls and Sean “P Diddy/ Puff Daddy” Combs. Poe also made a

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<sup>73</sup> Stic.man, *The Art of Emcee-ing* (Atlanta: Boss Up Publisher, 2005), 13.

<sup>74</sup> Diane Taylor provides details about the receptor and transmitter in *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

song entitled “Biggie Smallz” and enters the argument about the best rapper ever by claiming Biggie as the best. Their reception of Hip Hop created a repository of embodied knowledge that was instrumental in cultivating the culture through their albums and music videos (archive), performances (repertoire) and clothing brands.

They are also part of a team. Their “teams” consist of people whom they have grown up with and come from the same areas of St. Louis that they came from. Their teams also include members of their label: Flame – Clear Sight Music, Thi’sl – Full Ride Music Group and Poe – Delmar Records. Another component of their teams is the communities they are part of, ranging from their churches to community organizations. Flame, Thi’sl and Poe make decisions with their teams, are indirectly influenced by them and team members motivate the three emcees to keep going. Their teams also do behind the scenes work like website maintenance, booking, and event planning. Their teams were integral to putting on the concerts in response to Brown’s killing. Flame, Thi’sl and Poe were not on stage alone (literally and figuratively), they had a whole team behind them and they were representing for that team.

Another significant component of Hip Hop culture that contextualizes Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s cultural expression is that Hip Hop is an African diasporic aesthetic. Lawrence Levine, in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, discusses the origins of slave religious music and describes West African music as being “characterized by complex rhythmic structure, percussive qualities, the polymeter, the syncopation and the emphasis on overlapping call and response.”<sup>75</sup> He also explains that: “In America, as in Africa Negro music, both vocal and instrumental, was intimately

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<sup>75</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom 30th anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.



ties to bodily movement.”<sup>76</sup> Further, Sterling Stuckey, in *Slave Culture*, argues that an African cultural heritage does not separate the sacred and the secular.<sup>77</sup> All of these characteristics are evident in Hip Hop and revealed in their performances.

## **Common Characteristics of their Performances**

Hip Hop must be felt. Words alone, music alone, songs alone, sound from speakers alone and visuals alone inadequately portray the rage, anger, joy, excitement, anxiety, memories and knowledge being communicated. The application of the sacred and secular divide to Hip Hop will lead to an insufficient depiction of the forces that are interacting with each other. Therefore, Hip Hop rhetoric is all encompassing. Hip Hop communicates through embodied behaviors, music, the beat, emphatically pronounced words and lyrics. These entities amalgamate and come forth at the live performances and create a “sacred” space for all of those in attendance.

DJs pioneered Hip Hop.<sup>78</sup> They were responsible for getting the party started and keeping it going. Their goal was to get the crowd to move. By the end of the 1970’s, the attention shifted away from the DJ to the emcee. While embodied behaviors from the crowd remained significant, emcees’ embodied behaviors took center stage. In “From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative,” Greg Dimitriadis states:

Early rappers, for example, often had a number of floating chants such as ‘shock the house’ or ‘throw your hands in the air’ – chants which framed freestyle rhymed couplets, calls to members of the audience, or short non-semantic vocable routines. Rhymed tales or stories were a part of the music, but such stories were usually not related to some longer thematic song structure.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America 25th anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>78</sup> Clive Campbell (DJ Kool Herc) is recognized as the pioneer of Hip Hop. Jeff Chang provides the most descriptive history of Hip Hop in *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005). It describes how the focus was originally on the DJ and later shift to the emcee.

<sup>79</sup> Greg Dimitriadis “From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative,” in *That’s the Joint: The Hip-Hop Reader 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, eds. Mark A. Neal and Murray Forman (New York: Routledge, 2012), 584.

Dimitriadis' explanation is important to understanding the significance of bodily movement and call and response at Hip Hop performances during the early years. While Flame, Thi'sl and Tef Poe all have recording albums, during their performances, they did not perform all of the songs on their albums but carefully crafted a playlist in order to create a certain environment.

Flame's, Thi'sl's and Tef Poe's embodied behaviors, music and call and response are all linked together. They convey specific messages through embodied behaviors such as facial expressions, jumping, skipping, bouncing, squatting, head bobbing, and hand gestures.<sup>80</sup> The most prevalent movements among all Hip Hop emcees are the usage of their hands. This was highly evident in Flame's, Thi'sl's and Poe's performances. They carefully crafted hand motions and synchronized their hand movements with the lyrics and the beat. Flame's, Thi'sl's and Poe's embodied movements guided the crowd.

Performance scholars note semiotic gestures and words codified action in cultural performances. . In Hip Hop the majority of the audiences knows the songs and discerns the emcee's moves and codified phrases. Outsiders miss the hidden meanings.

Another major component of performance is the beat. The pulse of the performance with heavy booming from the bass and the beat "knocks."<sup>81</sup> The combination of movement, instruments, with emotions and synchronization with the

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<sup>80</sup> These bodily movements are primarily done by EMCEEs. I recognize that B-Boys/Girls have a complete repertoire of dance moves. I also would like to point out that EMCEE performances are different from graffiti artists, further study should be done on graffiti performances.

<sup>81</sup> The beat "knocking" is a slang word that connotes the beat of the song resonates well with the listener.

crowd leads to entrainment.<sup>82</sup> This state transcends individuality and morphs to the group being on one accord. Schechner presents it this way: “When mood displays are ritualized into mass actions, individual expression is discouraged or prohibited and replaced by exaggerated, rhythmically coordinated, repetitive actions and utterances.”<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s live performances avail utterances and declarations that can only be fully experienced during the concert. Schechner says this about the uniqueness of performances: “Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances.”<sup>84</sup> Their live Hip Hop performances bring all of the elements and emotions of Hip Hop and Black life together.

As a result, Hip Hop performances create a space in which practice, creativity, spontaneity, improvisation, skill, emotions, energy, and rhythm collide creating an atmosphere which transcends linear notions of time. Flame’s, Thi’sl’s and Tef Poe’s concerts brought all of the elements and emotions of Hip Hop and life in St. Louis together. The city of St. Louis was in a state of civil unrest. Some of those who lived in Black Ferguson were angry, anxious and dissatisfied with the Ferguson police department, local government and St. Louis Public Schools. Additionally, the lyrics invoke memories of particular songs or previous devaluing incidents. When Flame, Thi’sl and Poe were rapping, the beat started thumping, the energy started flowing and

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Jankowsky in “Music, Spirit Possession and the In-Between: Ethnomusicological Inquiry and the Challenge of Trance” provides Judith Becker’s depiction of entrainment: “she postulates that trance is brought about by musical rhythmic entrainment, a kind of structural coupling-the synchronization of multiple bodies and brains-that shifts the autonomic nervous system into ‘overdrive’.” (pg. 190)

<sup>83</sup> Schechner, Performance, 64.

<sup>84</sup> Schechner, Performance, 20.

the crowd started to reflect over all they went through; the crowd “lost themselves,” zoned out or attempted to forget about everything and envisioned a new future.

Bruce Barnhart, in his discussion of the incompleteness of time in James P. Johnson’s jazz performances evokes Hegel’s conception of time and states: “The present is cloven by its relation to the past and the future, relations that mark the present as consisting of both being and not-being. Every present is an unstable mixture of being and not-being, a negative rather than a positive unity, and is thus characterized by a radical instability.” Barnhart captures the sense of time created by Hip Hop performance spaces. The present moment of the concerts brought together oppressive memories with a future hope, which created a sacred space in all three performances.

## **Flame – Gospel Centered Raptivist**

### **Who is Flame? - Shared Social Significance of the Breach**

Flame, born Marcus Gray, grew up in the inner city of St. Louis. He was influenced by “the Hip Hop culture, the gang culture and the drug culture.”<sup>85</sup> This influence came from being in the inner city and his home. His father was a hustler on the streets by dealing drugs and eventually became addicted to drugs.<sup>86</sup> Flame’s mother also “came from a gang oriented background,” dealt with depression and was diagnosed as schizophrenia.<sup>87</sup> Flame uses his background to reveal that he knows Hip Hop and can directly relate to those who are struggling in the ‘hood. Although he is a

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<sup>85</sup> 100 Huntley Street, “Christian Rapper ‘Flame’ Says God Has Best Hand For Everyone, ‘Royal Flush’,” 1/29/14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vHNlr8iY7M>, accessed August 30, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Jessica Toomer, “Christian Rapper Flame Talks About His New Album ‘Forward’,” <https://www.guideposts.org/positive-living/christian-rapper-flame-talks-about-his-new-album-forward?nopaging=1>, accessed August 30, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> 700 Club, “Marcus ‘FLAME’ Gray: Living Life For God (@700club @flame314 @rapzilla),” 3/21/2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujQEX5JRfoM>, accessed August 30, 2015.

Christian and not a “G,” Flame asserts: “Hold up hold up, don’t get it twisted/ We ain’t out of touch just cause we Christian.”<sup>88</sup>

Two major life events shaped his worldview and transformed his life. The first incident was a car accident with an eighteen wheeler. In the song “Alive,” Flame raps:

*Then I see this truck on our side like it's 'bout to pass  
But I look up and guess what? We about to crash  
Next we collide, 'bout to die, I can't even yell,  
Only thing I'm thinking is I'm about to go to hell*<sup>89</sup>

He describes that he was a passenger and was “hit by an eighteen wheeler” that sent them “spinning down the highway 360, 65/70 miles per hour.” He continues: “Eventually we hit the left side of the highway. The car flips over and it wrecks the entire left side of my body. I had to do physical therapy for a year.”<sup>90</sup> After the car accident, his grandmother died.

The broken relationship with his parents led to Flame growing very close to his grandmother. His grandmother was “the strongest pillar of Christianity” in his family and was the first to share the Christianity with him. Therefore, her death deeply impacted his life. He shared: “I felt like I lost a part of my own soul. I felt like a part of my being was cut off. She was my everything.”<sup>91</sup> Flame reached a point of hopelessness. At this juncture, Flame says in his bio: “I was invited to church, and I resisted for a while. Then eventually I went, heard the gospel, heard about Jesus’ love, dying for my sin, and I

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<sup>88</sup> Marcus Gray, “Sleepin” *Royal Flush* (Clear Sight Music, 2013). “G” is short for gangster.

<sup>89</sup> Marcus Gray, “Alive” *Captured* (Clear Sight Music, 2010).

<sup>90</sup> 100 Huntley Street, *Christian Rapper “Flame” Says God Has Best Hand For Everyone*, “*Royal Flush*,” 1/29/14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vHNlr8iY7M>, accessed August 30, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> 700 Club, *Marcus “FLAME” Gray: Living Life For God (@700club @flame314 @rapzilla)* 3/21/2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujQEX5JRfoM>, accessed August 30, 2015.

wept like a baby, and I gave my life to the Lord. I was 16 years old.”<sup>92</sup> Flame’s conversion to Jesus meant that he has an eternal hope, this hope drives his activism.

Flame is the most vocal of the three emcees about his faith. He overtly identifies as a “Midwest Christian Rapper”<sup>93</sup> and this identity is the most pronounced. He believes that as a Christian rapper “it’s still Jesus all the way.”<sup>94</sup> His goal is to bring the truth of the gospel to bear upon the realities of life in a secularized American society and particularly focuses on Hip Hop culture. Flame holds to the Reformed theological tradition.<sup>95</sup> There are a variety of theological perspectives within the Reformed tradition. A starting place for beginning to conceptualize how “Christian rappers” understand Reformed theology is summarized by the “Five Points” of Calvinism using the mnemonic TULIP.<sup>96</sup> Flame’s theological stance is intertwined throughout much of his music. The song that best captures his theology is “Who Can Pluck Us.” In this song he raps about substitutionary atonement, limited atonement, predestination and election. While Flame grew up in the inner city of St. Louis and was kicked out of school, he does not address systemic and institutional racism.

### **Flame’s Understanding of the Problem**

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<sup>92</sup> Clear Sight Music, “Flame,” <http://clearsightmusic.com/flame>, accessed December 23, 2014.

<sup>93</sup> The term “Christian Rap” is highly problematic. Primarily, it entails a sacred and secular divide with secular music being identified as rap and the artist as rappers and sacred being identified with Christian rap and the artist Christians rappers. This classification is extremely limiting. Christianity is the only religion this classification is used on, the clearest example is Lupe Fiasco is not called a “Muslim Rapper.” I provide a more comprehensive argument in “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop.” <http://jhhsonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Refocusing-and-Redefining.pdf>

<sup>94</sup> Marcus Gray, “All the Way” Single (Clear Sight Music, 2010).

<sup>95</sup> The Reformed tradition is usually associated with Calvinism. This is problematic because Reformed theology includes sources other than John Calvin. Alister McGrath discusses this in the section “The Swiss Reformation – the Reformed Church,” in the book *Christian Theology*.

<sup>96</sup> T stands for total depravity, U stands for unconditional election, L stands for limited atonement, I stands for irresistible grace and P stands for the perseverance of the saints. Lampmode, a prominent label and group of Christians in Hip Hop, discussed Reformed Theology and their starting point was the five points of Calvinism. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9whbJ-3aXR4> They provide an accurate representation for many Christians in Hip Hop who would identify as Reformed.

Flame's theological convictions influence his understanding of the root cause troubling the people of Ferguson. Primarily, he believes that the main issue is that in a fallen world, people are hopeless.<sup>97</sup> Ferguson caused Flame to contemplate exactly what the problem is. He explicitly states:

It really turned up in my mind around the time of Ferguson. I think that's when I started to see things happening that our generation, we just aren't really familiar with by way of experience. We've read things about stuff like that in the past but we never lived with it, slept with it and seen it.<sup>98</sup>

Focusing specifically on Brown's death and the reaction to it, Flame recognizes the "social issues"<sup>99</sup> as the range of emotions some people of Ferguson are undergoing; a different group of people from St. Louis who are upset by the devastation from the uprising; the material and capital impact on the local businesses in Ferguson; and the disunity resulting from differing perspectives on the situation. In addition to hopelessness and social issues, Flame is concerned that Christians are not bold about their faith.

Cornel West, in *Race Matters*, argues that African Americans wrestle with nihilism. He defines nihilism as "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness."<sup>100</sup> Flame agrees that nihilism is an issue for some people in Ferguson but does not start with West. The

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<sup>97</sup> Flame lays out his view of a fallen world in the album *Our World: Fallen*, Cross Movement Records, 2007.

<sup>98</sup> Wade Harris, *Flame "Moving Forward" Interview*, 7/1 August 15, <http://wadeoradio.com/flame-moving-forward-interview/>, accessed August 30, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Elliot Welier, "Hope For Ferguson Sparks Restoration," 10/17/14, <http://kplr11.com/2014/10/17/hope-for-ferguson-sparks-restoration/>, accessed December 22, 2014. Flame provides the purpose of the event in an interview with the local television station, KPRLR 11, "There are a few different emotions, there's anger, there's frustration, there's confusion, but then ultimately there's hope. That's my message. My message is to come in and let people know, as a Christian with that world view, the Bible has answers and we want people to feel that and also to understand we get the social issues as well. We want serve on both fronts."

<sup>100</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 23.

April before Brown's killing, Flame's record label, Clear Sight Music, put out the album *Jesus or Nothing*. Flame equates "nothing" to nihilism and instead of building upon West; he invokes Friedrich Nietzsche. The "Excerpt" states: "Nietzsche understood that a cosmos without God is a world without objective meaning.... The philosophy cannot give us a basis of purpose or meaning or hope."<sup>101</sup> Flame proclaims that the world in general and particularly those in Ferguson dealing with Brown's killing are dealing with nihilism, which renders one hopeless.

Evidence of Flame's perspective of nihilism and hopelessness during the performance, is the name of the event - "Hope for Ferguson," which was also on the t-shirts Flame, Mike Real and all those who were involved with the event wore, the songs he chose to perform, and the mini messages in between the songs. Flame had eight albums out by the time of the concert therefore he intentionally chose specific songs in order to communicate a certain message. The songs he chose which reveal his understanding of the problem of hopelessness are "Immortals," "Trap Money," and "Start Over." Flame performed along with his co-label mate, MikeReal. "Immortals" is actually MikeReal's song from the album *Jesus or Nothing*. The first part of the hook is:

*Ain't you tired of just having nothing  
Ain't you tired of the same issues  
Don't you want more than being mediocre  
Chasing things you can't take with you*<sup>102</sup>

Before he performed the song "Trap Money," Flame described how "chasing things you can't take with you" encapsulated hopelessness. He stated: "You may be living life on your own pace, marching to the beat of your own drum... you can pursue fast money

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<sup>101</sup> Clear Sight Music, "Excerpt," *Jesus or Nothing* (Clear Sight Music, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> Clear Sight Music, "The Immortals featuring MikeReal," *Jesus or Nothing* (Clear Sight Music, 2014).



and a fast paced lifestyle but apart from God, you are going to get yourself in a lot of trouble.” Flame believes that “trap money” or money that is obtained from hustling on the street does not offer hope. The original song features Thi’sl and Young Noah. In the concert, he raps Thi’sl’s opening verse. In one part of Thi’sl’s verse, Flame raps:

*See his daddy was a dope boy  
Uncle was a dope boy/brother was a dope boy  
Sister was a dope girl  
Cousin was a dope boy  
Only thing that he knew was dope boy  
Now everybody that I named in jail or dead*

Through the performance, Flame was able to draw upon Thi’sl’s insight and communicate the destructive qualities of drugs. He posits that fast money and the fast life will not solve the problems the people of Ferguson are enduring.

Flame’s performance of the song “Start Over” most explicitly displays how he understands that hopelessness is the problem. In performing this song, he had the music lowered which allowed his voice to be amplified. In delivering the lyrics, he is partially stooping down and leaning forward. His body language is in sync with the lowered music and the message he is communicating. With the music lowered, moving slowly across the stage, his body properly positioned and his right hand waving towards him signaling “what I am about to say is extremely important,” Flame raises his voice and proclaims “I know you think there is no hope!”

In addition to hopelessness, Flame focused on the disunity between races, broadly in America and particularly in Ferguson. Wilson’s killing of Brown polarized the city of St. Louis. The original idea for the event actually came from Midtown Church’s

outreach committee.<sup>103</sup> The church was divided over the killing. Mark Tucker, pastor at Midtown stated: “I know that people in our church disagree [about the case]. Some have wanted to protest against the police. Others believe the shooting was justified. It’s a tense issue.”<sup>104</sup> The church wanted to do something to address the disunity and reach out to the Ferguson community. A member of the committee, Amy Fishbein, shared: “We wanted to do something relevant, but we got the sense that a lot of Christians weren’t sure what to do.”<sup>105</sup> They came up with the idea of having a “buycott” and a party in the park. A “buycott” is “an intentional, organized shopping event aimed at businesses in Ferguson and adjacent Dellwood, especially those damaged or affected by looting in the days after Michael Brown’s death.”<sup>106</sup>

Aaron Turner, Midtown’s director of outreach, knows Flame and reached out to him about putting on the event. Flame agreed to put on a concert because he recognized that Hip Hop concerts can bring people from various backgrounds together. Flame got his church, The Gate Church, involved which lead to two different churches from differing theological traditions and racial demographics working together. Midtown is ninety percent white, while The Gate Church is more diverse. Flame believed that Christians should be unified and bold about sharing the gospel.

In addition to racial dissension, Flame is concerned that Christians are being challenged in how they share their faith. Flame believes part of the problem is the discourse on how to preach the gospel. He identifies an implication of the secularization of American society is addressing social issues. Flame contends for the supremacy of

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<sup>103</sup> Midtown is a church located in the “crossroads of St. Louis city” which is close to downtown.

<sup>104</sup> Phil Mobley, “True Hope for Ferguson: Church Builds Unity Amid Unrest,” November 14/2014, <http://byfaithonline.com/true-hope-for-ferguson/>, accessed September 15, 2015.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Ibid

the gospel and the gospel should be the end goal. This is evident in the song he performed “Move.” He raps:

*Man, I hate my disobedience always second guessing God,  
When he tell me share my Faith,  
Now I gotta question that,  
Then I end up reasoning myself out of sayin' somethin',  
Now the opportunity is gone cause I ran from it.  
Now I'm praying for his Grace  
That every time I would speak in the schools,  
In the mall,  
On the job,  
On the streets.  
This is how it's gotta be I'm talkin' about obedience,  
Fearing god not man that is the ingredients<sup>107</sup>*

The main point Flame communicates, I think, through this song is that Christians who are not sharing their faith are being disobedient. He provides a narrative of his internal struggles of being faced with preaching the gospel. He then moves to encouraging Christians to share their faith throughout their daily lives.

### **Flame's Social Inclusiveness with the Crisis**

Flame was the furthest remove of the three artists from the killing of Michael Brown. This is evident on his social media timeline, music and during his performance. On his timeline on August 11, 2014, he states: “Praying for my city today. #LordUseUs #YourChurch” He then posted on August 14, 2014: “Out here at the city wide vigil. Pray for St. Louis. #NMOS14 #GatewayArch #MichaelBrown #Ferguson” After those two posts, he mentioned nothing else about the killing. His timeline was filled with tour dates and award nominations. Additionally, he does not talk about Brown’s murder impacting him directly at the concert or in any of the interviews that are available. Flame provided no commentary about actively being present when Ferguson erupted.

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<sup>107</sup> Marcus Gray, “Move,” *Captured* (Clear Sight Music, 2010).

## Flame's Performance Solutions/Activism/Mechanism

Flame's faith compels him to work in the St. Louis community. Flame organized and directed "Hope for Ferguson." Flame's goal was to invest in the community, particularly the stores impacted by the riot and offer hope to a place experiencing nihilism. The Facebook page for the event described it as "an event to support the Ferguson community and local businesses! Let's join together and shop at local Ferguson stores & restaurants. Free family festivities and FLAME concert to follow!"<sup>108</sup>

The day was organized by encouraging attendees to go shop at the identified business first. It was set up similar to a scavenger hunt and an online map was provided.<sup>109</sup> The assistance of mobilizing patrons to businesses affected by the riot should be clear. Additionally, spending in Ferguson also goes towards their highest budget revenue stream, sales tax.<sup>110</sup> The only measurable impact of several hundred people shopping in Ferguson is on the local business but it is hard to quantify this source of information.<sup>111</sup>

After the "buycott," the family activities and concert was held at Forestwood Park. Forestwood Park is located in Ferguson, on Ferguson Avenue, West of West Florissant Ave.

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<sup>108</sup> Amy Fishbein, "Hope For Ferguson," <https://www.facebook.com/events/700156940069885/>, accessed December 23, 2014.

<sup>109</sup> "Hope For Ferguson Scavenger BuyCott Map" Online map - <https://mapsengine.google.com/map/u/0/embed?mid=zycudUegltVU.kKttwRfD1Yf0>

<sup>110</sup> City of Ferguson Missouri, *Annual Operation Budget*, 2013-2014, <http://www.fergusoncity.com/DocumentCenter/View/1609>, accessed December 22, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> I am basing this on the plans of the day and the email I share by one of the attendees who mentioned participating in the "buycott."

Flame performed with his label mate MikeReal and DJ Chozyn Boy. They performed in the afternoon. Flame comments at the beginning of his performance of “Move” that the sun had come out.

Flame performed songs that created a partying atmosphere taking it back to when Hip Hop first started. The conditions in New York’s South Bronx in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s were very similar to the conditions in Ferguson. Flame facilitated a sense of unity, the same way Hip Hop did. In an interview by the Source with the pioneers of Hip Hop, DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, they discuss how they used to spin in parks. Herc remarked: “See, the park playing’ is like playin’ for your people. You give them something free.”<sup>112</sup> Bambaataa and Flash added that a wide variety of people would be in the park, including parents. Later in the interview, the Source asked them specifically about community:

The Source: You all seem to feel there’s a sense of community about the hip-hop scene during the party era that’s never really been recaptured.

Bam: Today it gets sickening with the disrespecting of self. To me a lot of brothers and sisters lost knowledge of self. They’re losing respect of the “us syndrome” and getting into the “I syndrome.”<sup>113</sup>

This is what Flame offered to Ferguson.

The material objects were the stage, sound equipment, DJ equipment and clothes. A stage was set up in the middle of the park. The stage provided enough room for Flame and MikeReal to move freely and for DJ Chozyn Boy to setup a table with turntables. The speakers were placed out in front of the stage. There was a cord from

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<sup>112</sup> Nelson George, “Hip-Hop Founding Fathers Speak the Truth,” in *That’s the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, eds. Mark A. Neal and Murray Forman (New York: Routledge, 2012), 50.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

one of the speakers going across the stage that Flame and Mike were careful not to trip over.

Flame was wearing black, red and white “J’s,” a slang term for Michael Jordan’s brand of shoes, black jeans, a white shirt with black and red letters and a Chicago Bulls gold chain snapback (hat). He also wore two ear rings and a gold bracelet on his left wrist. Flame intentionally colored coordinated every aspect of his clothing. MikeReal also coordinated his clothes. He was not wearing a snapback, but he wore a gold chain around his neck. They both wore the same shirt but different colors. For those who registered, they were able to go to Midtown Church STL and obtain a free t-shirt. The shirt read Hope For Ferguson with the F O R in red and on the back were all of sponsors. Flame and MikeReal wearing the same shirt availed unity between them and the majority of the crowd who also wore the same t-shirts. This set the group apart in the park. Further, when the group dispersed to their respective locations and wore their t-shirts, they advertised “Hope For Ferguson” and the sponsors of the event.

The by-product of having an open venue is that people may not know the songs. This was evident in Flame’s performance of “Move.” As a result, Flame had to teach them the embodied behaviors of Hip Hop performances. By doing so, Flame “looks to h[is] body as the receptor, storehouse, and transmitter of knowledge that comes from the repertoire of embodied knowledge.”<sup>114</sup> He teaches them Hip Hop moves. The steps are to be done at the opening of the song and along with the chorus. Flame commences by saying “how ya durring.” Due to the importance of verbalizing while rapping, regional dialects are accentuated. Flame’s identification of being from the Midwest compels him to pronounce certain words in distinct ways. Instead of doing, it is pronounced

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<sup>114</sup> Taylor, *Archive and Repertoire*, 82.

“durring.” A White female in the crowd that knew the song rapped the particular words right along with Flame and another younger White female who didn’t know the song focused on her. Her body language communicated surprise and curiosity that the White female knew the song.

Next, Flame vocalized the movements: “To the left with it/to the right with it” in unison with the beat. Simultaneously, he demonstrates, but since he is mirroring the crowd, when he says to the left, he actually moves right and vice versa. As he moves to the left, he holds the microphone in his left hand, hops off his left foot and raises his right hand and foot. As he moves right, he reverses but maintains the microphone in his left hand and swings his right arm left.

Transitioning from the opening to the chorus, Flame exhorts the crowd to put their hands up while he lifts his up and down. The crowd follows but the movements are not as fluid and Flame and the crowd was not harmonized. The beat breaks and the song repeat the word “move.” Flame asks the crowd to continually repeat move, and while the crowd does so, he tells the sound manager to turn his microphone up. This is another obstacle when doing outside events.

Throughout the concert, the crowd increasingly improved. Flame’s investment in teaching the strides limited his opportunities of spontaneity. Bodily gestures concurrent with rapping the verses included moving his hands back and forth primarily between his hat, in front of him and his waist. At times he would squat down to get closer to the crowd. He had a position that looked similar to a track runner in the “set” of the ready, set, go stance. This displays that Flame is focused on conveying his message with passion and intensity. He would emphasize certain words with quick and sharp

gestures, accentuating these words provide clarity and a deeper understanding that cannot be obtained by only listening to lyrics.

The familiarity with Hip Hop culture offered by Flame to this crowd exemplifies the possibilities of building unity through Hip Hop. Many participants arrived with little firsthand interaction with Hip Hop; others did not know Flame or the song. Flame used the microphone as a tool to project his voice carrying words of inspiration. Connectedly, through performance, Flame embodies and becomes the microphone emanating knowledge and memories. Flame's embodiment of and becoming the microphone is very similar to prophets of the Hebrew Bible who became conduits of God's message.

Something happened. Flame's performance of "Sanctuary" led the performance to entrainment. The hook is:

*Hands, hands, all I see is hands  
The saints is in the building, we warned them in advance  
And we ain't going nowhere, we praise him 'cause it's necessary  
So watch us turn this place into a sanctuary*<sup>115</sup>

The Spirit and emotions have played significant roles in the gathering of African Americans that includes drums, sound and/or chanted words.<sup>116</sup> Starting in slavery when Africans would participate in the ring shout to churches where congregants started "shouting." For Flame's performance, it is evident that the crowd learned the embodied behaviors. For young people and teenagers, the acquiring of new dance moves can generate excitement. Anna Halprin examined groups in similar situations and came to this conclusion:

"People began to move as if they were parts of a single body, not in uniform motion but in deeply interrelated ways. This recurrence of spatial and interrelated movement is no accident. It is an

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<sup>115</sup> Marcus Gray, "Sanctuary," *Royal Flush*, (Clear Sight Music, 2013).

<sup>116</sup> Some have confused the "move of the Spirit" in church with emotionalism. I am not contending that the two are the same but the Spirit can impact human emotions.



external version of the geometry and biology of our inner life – our bodies extended in space. In these archetypal movements people seemed to be tracing out the forms and patterns of a larger organism, communicating with and being moved by a group body-mind or spirit.”<sup>117</sup>

Halprin postulates that individual bodies were lost to the assembly and what happens inside the single body transcended each body and created a group “spirit.” The entire assemblage jumped up and down on beat, in rhythm and with their hands up. It essentially turned into a dance party because Flame and Mike did not repeat the hook; they primarily let the recorded track play.

Flame aided in transforming racial perceptions because he fits the description of the stereotypical “thug.”<sup>118</sup> As a result of the concert, those in attendance have a drastically different perception of Blacks with a Hip Hop social identity. Further, it was a Hip Hop emcee that transformed the opinions that people had about Ferguson. Evidence of transformed opinions is in an email that was shared with Amy Fishbein; for brevity, here is part of her email:

I just want to write and say THANK YOU for the wonderful event you planned for today. I made my first visit to Ferguson today and have to say that I was a bit apprehensive but I knew from the moment I heard about this that God was asking me to be a part of it. I wish the media would spend more time with all the cameras on events like this one. Events helping the community and showing the pride people have in their homes and towns. There is so much good and all we hear is the bad. It's a shame.<sup>119</sup>

The individual said she was apprehensive and later that the media only shows the bad. Extrapolating from her comments, the media disseminated negative racialized schemas about Ferguson that she consciously or unconsciously accepted and after attending the event, her thinking was altered. This is just one email, how many more minds were changed?

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<sup>117</sup> Schechner, *Performance*, 84 and Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*, 228-229.

<sup>118</sup> Seattle Seahawks Football player Richard Sherman argues that “thug” is the new N word. <http://time.com/2369/richard-sherman-thug-n-word/>

<sup>119</sup> I retrieved this email from the Facebook page of Hope For Ferguson, <https://www.facebook.com/events/700156940069885/>, accessed December 23, 2014.

Flame's take home message of hope was presented in his performance of the song "Start Over." In performing this song, he had the music lowered, which allowed his voice to be amplified. When he is about to deliver the punch line he, first moves his hands out, then back in, communicating that what I am about to say is very important. He then delivers, "I know you think there is no hope/but that ain't true, Jesus saves!" He moves his hand up to his hat and then his whole body down in one motion as if to put everything he can into delivering those lyrics. Flame communicated through his bodily movements that were intertwined with a calculated musical arrangement and lyrics that hope is found in Jesus.

Flame accomplished his mission of turning the park into a sanctuary. He also participated in rebuilding Ferguson's economy through the boycott. In the park, they garnered donations and gave money to Koch Elementary school. Flame's ability to perform Hip Hop challenged the popular conceptions of Blackness that identifies Black men as thugs. Ultimately, Flame's goal was to offer the hope of the gospel to a broken community, thereby making him a gospel centered raptivist. The letter from one of the participants points to the performance's contribution to fighting negative racialized perspectives. The immediate effects on Ferguson from the "Hope For Ferguson" event are unclear but what is clear is Flame's strategy of offering hope contributed to where Thi'sl is today.

### **Thi'sl – X-Hustling Raptivist**

*I had a dream/ I hopped on the plane with my whole team/ Then I hopped on stage and did my thing/ ... I had a dream/ That none of my dawgs wasn't dying/ So none of my dawgs wasn't crying*

### **Who is Thi'sl? - Shared Social Significance of the Breach**

Travis Tyler (Thi'sl) was a product of the racialized Black space in St. Louis and the long history of racism against Blacks. In an interview with Trackstarz, Thi'sl shared that his family once lived on a plantation in Mississippi and picked cotton.<sup>120</sup> Consequently, his last name comes from the name of a slave holder. He was born in Greenwood, Mississippi and at the age of two moved to St. Louis. Thi'sl grew up on the Westside of St. Louis, Missouri in the seventh district and twenty six ward. This is located approximately seven miles south of Ferguson. He moved around and the longest location he lived in was an apartment complex called Martanna on Maple Avenue.

His story is very similar to Flame's. His mother was a drug addict and his father was not present. Thi'sl's mother plays a prominent role in his narrative. While she struggled with drugs, she did what she could to take care of Thi'sl and his brother. He talks about the complexities of his relationship with his mother throughout much of his music. In "Hey Momma," Thi'sl raps:

*Hey Momma, I wanna say Momma  
I know it gets hard tryna be a single momma  
Kids acting up, Daddy long gone  
Bills stacking up, you're tryna make it on your own  
(I know it hurt) But don't let that break you  
If it don't kill you only thing it makes you  
Even more strong, you gotta hold on  
Hold your head high, Mommy this your song  
(Hey Momma) I know them nights stayed long  
Plus you're back in school  
I know your feet they hurt  
Everyday you come home<sup>121</sup>*

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<sup>120</sup> <http://trackstarz.com/2015/10/thisl-talks-line-4-line-ferguson-and-louis-farrakhan-thisl-trackstarz-miltonwallace/>

<sup>121</sup> Travis Tyler, "Hey Momma," *Beautiful Monster* (Full Ride Music Group, 2013).

Thi'sl centers the struggles his mother endured as a result of the absence of his father and the turmoil that he caused as a child. While she may not have been able to provide the ideal household for Thi'sl and his siblings, she persevered and did what she could.

Due to the absence of his father and the complex relationship with his mother, Thi'sl started hustling at the age of twelve. In a mini documentary entitled "Testimony," he shares that he "grew up all his life hustling."<sup>122</sup> He was expelled from all St. Louis public schools at the age of thirteen. I asked Thi'sl over Twitter "what would you say is the #1 reason why you started hustling?" He simply said "didn't want to be hungry."<sup>123</sup>

While he was living with his father, Thi'sl got into more trouble. He stole his father's gun and was "hanging out with all kinds of dudes."<sup>124</sup> His father then displaced Thi'sl from out of his house and told him that he could no longer live with him. Thi'sl goes on to explain that the absence of his father led to adopting men in his 'hood, "hustlers," as father figures. As a result of not having his father present, being impoverished and raised by a single mother, Thi'sl was a full blooded goon. His cousin "Dudda" explained it this way:

I can remember days where he came outside and whatever he said it went. You know what I'm saying. Nobody questioned that. You know what I'm saying. If something happened, it happened. I ain't going into a lot of details and say everything that happened but a lot of things did happen. You know what I'm saying. So at the same time it's like, dude won't no faker out here. Like everything that he telling y'all in these songs that he is doing is true. You know what I'm saying. I can remember being on Barber, in the house with him, me him and his baby mama. You know what I'm saying. Dogs running around, little beat machines, guns, peoples in and out. You know what I'm saying. His house actually was the spot. That's where the whole block hung at. You know what I'm saying. If he didn't want you on the front, he came out and moved you. As far as being on the West Side Everybody know who Thi'sl is. He really did you all a favor by leaving.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Travis Tyler, "THI'SL TESTIMONY," 3/23/2011, <https://youtu.be/EuiAA9biPPo>, accessed July 5, 2015.

<sup>123</sup> THI'SL, KING (Thisl). 18 Jul 2015, 11:47 UTC. Tweet

<sup>124</sup> Tyler, "THI'SL TESTIMONY"

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

The turning point for Thi'sl was when one of his partners killed his cousin Tank. Thi'sl shares: "When he killed Tank, it rocked my whole life, it rocked my whole foundation."<sup>126</sup> The killing of Tank completely shifted his world view. Thi'sl's paradigm was shaped by the hood. He explains "that stuff wasn't normal because dudes don't kill they partners. It rocked me. The first thing I did was turned to God."<sup>127</sup>

After this incident, Flame along with J.R. (another Hip Hop artist) and some members from West End Mount Caramel Church, were doing outreach to Thi'sl's area. They connected with Thi'sl and brought him to the church. A week later, he was falsely arrested for murder. He spent three days in jail and while in jail, he prayed and asked God to intervene. The charges were eventually dropped. After Thi'sl was released from jail, incrementally he went into a different direction. J.R. testifies that he "was the first person I saw that was a product of the ghetto straight be delivered by the power of the Lord."<sup>128</sup>

The lyrics that capture the sentiment of Thi'sl's past and transformation are in the song he performed "Let It Knock,"

*Hustle hustle, that's all I knew  
But I'm from Hustle City, that's what we do  
I should be in the pen like Larry Hoover  
For flippin' work, bangin' Rutgers  
13, I was a shooter  
But Jesus saved my life, hallelujah*<sup>129</sup>

He celebrates that he is not "in the pen," in other words, incarcerated for his actions while hustling. Instead, he is free from jail and experiencing a new sense of freedom to fully live his life.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Travis Tyler, "Let it Knock," *Beautiful Monster* (Full Ride Music, 2013).

Thi'sl's new outlook on life also shifted his Hip Hop identity. He used to be identified as Uncle Y and rapped about the gang life he was living. He now goes by Thi'sl, the X-Hustler. Thi'sl stands for This House I Shall Live. Thi'sl believes that he is a vessel of God. He identifies as a Christian rapper and is supported by the "Christian Hip Hop" community. But his music is played on mainstream radio stations and he performs along with other mainstream artists. While he is no longer involved with selling drugs and the gang life, Thi'sl is still very connected to that community.

### **Thi'sl's Understanding of the Problem**

Thi'sl recognizes that the people of St. Louis in general and Ferguson in particular are enduring "oppression." This oppression primarily consists of a poor education system in St. Louis Public Schools and improper policing by the Ferguson and St. Louis Police Departments. In addition to "oppression," Thi'sl believes that there is a lack of leadership in Black communities. Directly after the killing of Michael Brown, he believes that the uprising contributed to what the people of Ferguson were enduring. Additionally, the responses to the uprising by some White people highlighted the lack of empathy that some Whites have for Blacks who are struggling.

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Thi'sl held a town hall meeting at Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist church. In an interview with DJ Wade O, Thi'sl quoted these comments by one of the attendees: "(while crying) A part of me feel likes there is no hope for him (her son) because of where he lives and the stuff around him. My son is not being educated at the same level as the children in the county."<sup>130</sup> Thi'sl went on to talk about the disparate education system between St. Louis city schools and county schools. He stated: "Kids

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<sup>130</sup> Wade Harris, *Full Interview with Thi'sl*, August 25/15, <http://wadeoradio.com/full-interview-with-thisl/>, accessed December 20, 2014.

in the city schools probably don't even have computers in their class."<sup>131</sup> He concludes his remarks by saying "That's an issue of oppression."<sup>132</sup>

Another factor that contributes to Blacks in St. Louis "oppression" is the policing by the St. Louis Police Departments. Thi'sl asserts that the terrible policing practices contributed to the eruption in Ferguson. In the interview with DJ Wade O, he shared a story about his cousin who was suing the police at the time of the interview. He explained that the Ferguson Police department physically wounded his cousin while he was handcuffed until he was unconscious.<sup>133</sup> In the same interview, Thi'sl also provided evidence of his personal uneasiness whenever he is stopped by the police; he calls his wife whenever it happens. Further, Thi'sl explained that there are good cops and bad cops. The "bad cops" would pick Blacks up and drop them off in a rival neighborhood.

In addition to the education system and police departments, Thi'sl contends that Black people oppress themselves. He states in the interview with DJ Wade O that "we are our own oppressor, we hate each other."<sup>134</sup> Thi'sl posits that Black self oppression is a result of "Black on Black crime" and drugs. Thi'sl bases this perspective on his previous experiences and his current involvement with the community. He raps about the impact of violence and drugs on Black communities in several songs, most notably "I Hate You (Crack)" and "What Are We Fighting For." In "I Hate You (Crack)," he raps:

*How could you take the little girl  
And crush her whole dreams  
Take a strong woman  
And turn her to a fiend  
I seen it with my own two*

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Wade Harris, *Full Interview with Thi'sl*, August 25/15, <http://wadeoradio.com/full-interview-with-thisl/>, accessed December 20, 2014.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

*You almost crushed my whole team*<sup>135</sup>

The song is about the negative impact of crack cocaine on people who live in the hood. In these lines, Thi'sl is rapping about women who use cocaine and eventually became addicted to it. As a result, their whole life is paralyzed and they can no longer pursue any goals they may have had before using cocaine. Thi'sl also raps that cocaine hurt his team. While they were able to garner some money from selling it, life for his "team" (or other men in the community) actually got harder.

The issue surrounding the selling and usage of drugs flows into "Black on Black crime." Thi'sl explains that people would sell cocaine to mothers. Whenever a deal went wrong, then the murder cycle would begin. At this juncture is where Thi'sl explains that Black people begin to hate each other. Once a cousin or brother is shot, the surviving family member or friend retaliates. Therefore, violence, drugs and all that is intertwined with the two, are oppressing St. Louis, according to Thi'sl.

In addition to the oppression Blacks in St. Louis are bearing, Thi'sl believes that racism is persistent. Thi'sl identifies racism as negative perceptions of people based on race. Therefore, Blacks and Whites can be racists. As a Christian, he shares in the Wade O radio interview that he holds to Galatians 3:28, which states: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (New Revised Standard Version).<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Travis Tyler, "I Hate You (Crack)," *Free from the Trap* (Full Ride Music Group, 2012).

<sup>136</sup> Wade Harris, *Full Interview with Thi'sl*, August 25/15, <http://wadeoradio.com/full-interview-with-thisl/>, accessed December 20, 2014.



Therefore, anything that goes against this perspective of equality for him is racism. In his explanation of Blacks being racists too, he proclaimed: “I don’t do Black power.”<sup>137</sup>

Thi’sI identified the immediate problems of the response to the killing of Brown as the uprising in and of itself. He did not support the looting and burning down of stores and schools. Although he did not agree with the way some Blacks responded in Ferguson, he did say that he understands. Consequently, Thi’sI understood the response by some White people that were chastising Blacks as lacking empathy. He states in the Wade O interview that the reason they “thought that way,” which was dismissive of the emotions Black people were experiencing, “was because they were White.”<sup>138</sup>

### **Thi’sI’s Social Inclusiveness of the Crisis**

Thi’sI was out of town August 9<sup>th</sup>, but soon returned and was in the midst of the uprising. On social media and in several interviews, Thi’sI emphatically exclaimed that he was not out protesting against Ferguson police but wanted to stay neutral.<sup>139</sup> In fact, Thi’sI reached out to the police commissioner inquiring about what he could do to help. From his perspective, people were taunting and harassing the police. He was primarily out keeping the peace by trying to prevent people from looting, “harassing” the police, and speaking out against others who were telling the crowds to shoot back.

When Thi’sI protested, he led chants that stated:

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<sup>137</sup> Wade Harris, *Full Interview with Thi’sI*, August 25/15, <http://wadeoradio.com/full-interview-with-thisI/>, accessed December 20, 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Trackstarz, *Thi’sI talks Line 4 Line, Ferguson, and Louis Farrakhan (@ThisI @trackstarz)*, <http://trackstarz.com/2015/10/thisI-talks-line-4-line-ferguson-and-louis-farrakhan-thisI-trackstarz-miltonwallace/>, accessed November 5, 2015.

<sup>139</sup> David Daniels, “St. Louis Rapper Thi’sI Takes Action After Michael Brown Killing,” August 15, 2014, accessed December 3, 2015 and Harris, *Full Interview with Thi’sI*.

“We gone do this peaceful. We gone do this powerful. We gone do this the way it is suppose to be done.”<sup>140</sup>

“No violence! Just Justice!”<sup>141</sup>

Thi’sl’s goal was to maintain peace. Since he recognized the tensions that were already building up before Brown’s killing, he wanted to create an opportunity for Blacks to constructively air their frustrations. Thi’sl believed that ultimately, although the protestors were frustrated and angry, they were going to have to wait until the justice system made the decision about Darren Wilson.

A significant point to Thi’sl relationship to Brown’s killing is that he is actually friends with Michael Brown Senior. Thi’sl spoke to Mike Sr. and discovered how the killing shook him up. In the Wade O interview, Thi’sl explained that Mike Sr. did not want violence, just justice for his son. He articulated that those who were looting were not speaking Mike Sr.’s language. Mike’s perspective influenced how Thi’sl responded, including his chants for no violence and only justice.

### **Thi’sl’s Performance Solutions/Activism/Mechanism**

In response to the oppression, racism, and material destruction from the uprising, Thi’sl believes Black people need to rebuild their own community. He desires for Blacks to start seeking healing and move on from the past. Thi’sl contends that Blacks are way past the 60’s. The evidence he points to is the existence of a Black president, Black teachers and Ben Carson. As a Christian, he believes that Black and White churches should answer the call to go out and rebuild broken communities.

In an interview with St. Louis television station, KPLR 11, Thi’sl shared that there was a lack of leadership within the Black community in St. Louis and how effective

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<sup>140</sup> Daniels, *St. Louis Rapper Thi’sl Takes Action After Michael Brown Killing*.

<sup>141</sup> Daniels, *St. Louis Rapper Thi’sl Takes Action After Michael Brown Killing*.

leadership comes from people who have a relationship with that community. He calls this community based leadership.<sup>142</sup> The evidence he provided was during the uprising, he was able to manage the young males that he mentored. They were not involved with any type of violence.<sup>143</sup>

Furthermore, Thi'sl expressed his goals of rebuilding Black communities in the middle of the uprising. On the bull horn, he proclaimed:

"When we get done with Ferguson, we are going to clean up our own neighborhoods too."

"We going to see change. We are going to pull some leaders out of our own community. And vote them into police chief, and vote them into mayor, and vote them into alderman and vote them into every office in the community."<sup>144</sup>

Thi'sl depicted his long term plans to bring substantial change. He could not completely control the massive crowd and protesting did not appear to address the problems that were plaguing Ferguson and other Black communities in St. Louis. In addition to building the community within, Thi'sl aims to get Blacks into positions of power. Thi'sl believes that this recipe will bring lasting change.

Several months after the eruption, on December 13, 2014 Thi'sl and his team put on "Prayer Under the Arch" and "Hope for the City" concert. Thi'sl hoped to create a space that would bring Christians together and encourage them to go out and be active agents in St. Louis. To address racial discord, similar to Flame, those working with Thi'sl wanted to have an event in which everyone from different backgrounds, skin tones and up bringing could come together. At the time of Brown's killing, Thi'sl's timeline (and many other Hip Hop artists) was filled with arguments over the situation. His goal was to

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<sup>142</sup> KPLR11, *Rapper Thi'sl Makes Call for Peace Following Unrest in Ferguson*, November 25/ 14, [http://kplr11.com/2014/November 25/rapper-this-l-makes-call-for-peace-following-unrest-in-ferguson/](http://kplr11.com/2014/November%2025/rapper-this-l-makes-call-for-peace-following-unrest-in-ferguson/), accessed December 20, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Daniels, *St. Louis Rapper Thi'sl Takes Action After Michael Brown Killing*.

bring people together in person and get them off social media and into a party atmosphere.

The first part of the day was “Prayer Under the Arch,” which was held at the steps of the arch. His overall vision is to have a sustained praying community situated in St. Louis. Thi’sl provided some opening comments during the prayer time. He stated: “I pray and have a vision... that we would have this kind of gathering in St. Louis and have prayer under the arch, hopefully one day see it grow to something bigger and bigger that glorify the Lord to bring a light to St. Louis and the whole world.”<sup>145</sup> Prayer is important to Thi’sl because it brings people together. The tangible gathering of people creates a space that promotes unity. Therefore, Thi’sl is directly responding to the division in the church that he understood to be a problem by calling the “faith community and believers to come together and put that on the forefront.”<sup>146</sup>

Thi’sl closed his comments by saying: “We going to pray today. We going to turn it all the way up tonight! We picked a smaller and more intimate venue because we wanted it to be a certain way.”<sup>147</sup> Thi’sl’s primary message being communicated at the “Hope For the City” concert was to encourage Christians to go out and offer hope to the city of St. Louis Christians were his primary audience for the concert. The concert was held at the Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church, which is approximately fifteen minutes south of Ferguson. The distance away from Ferguson communicates that Thi’sl did not want to directly interact with the people of Ferguson. Given that the concert was at a church, he sharpened his focus on bringing in Christians. The audience consisted

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<sup>145</sup> Introductory comments provided during the actual event.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

of members from Flame's church, The Gate Church, people from St. Louis and fans that traveled to St. Louis.

The capacity for the sanctuary is two thousand five hundred people. Thi'sl did have the option to invite more people. The concert was held in the Youth Worship Center which is only ten thousand square feet. The stage was set up for the concert, which reduced the amount of available space for the crowd. The stage was big enough to fit the lights, sound equipment, the DJ (Chozen Boy, the same DJ for Flame) and his mixer and space for more than five artists to move around. Therefore, crowd was "intimate," in that all the attendees were packed into the room.<sup>148</sup>

Lecrae Moore, rap artist and co-founder of Reach Records, hosted and emceed the concert. In addition to Thi'sl, five Hip Hop artists performed: Derek Minor, Propaganda, J.R., Flame and MikeReal. Along with Thi'sl's desire to "turn up," they all performed partying songs. While the artists had a coordinated theme in song selection and message, they did not coordinate their clothes in the same way Flame and MikeReal did in "Hope for Ferguson." He wore Full Ride Music clothes. He had on a White Snapback cap with Full Ride's logo on the front: a "F" and "R" in a circle. The F and R stands for Full Ride. He also had on a Black shirt with a red granulated and vertical stripe on the front. It is called a "Blood Post Tee" on Thi'sl's merchandise site and symbolizes the blood of the lamb, which refers to God covering sin with the blood of Jesus.

Thi'sl performed "Snap Off," "Motivation," "Let it Knock," and "King without a Crown." All of these songs were up tempo with heavy bass and inspired the crowd to

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<sup>148</sup> He stated in the introductory comments that his goal was to have an intimate atmosphere for the concert.

move. These songs performed together create a holistic story that communicates Thi'sl's story and inspires Christians to go out and be agents of change. "Snap Off" is a party starting song that is full of energy. The hook is:

*Snap off, snap off, I'm about to snap off  
You might wanna step back derryty and give your boy some room*<sup>149</sup>

To snap means to completely release one-self of whatever is holding the individual back. In this case, Thi'sl is saying he is about to be free to perform and wants to encourage the crowd to freely move. In the second verse of the song, Thi'sl raps:

*Please give me some space, I am about to get off in my zone*<sup>150</sup>

Thi'sl is rapping about the actual physical space of dancing but then refers to a different place of getting in his zone. This "zone" is the space when the individual completely leaves all boundaries, whether they are the issues they came in with or concerns for what others may think about them, and get to a space of complete freedom.

"Let it Knock" is also a hype song. As already explained, this song celebrates the transformation from where Thi'sl used to be as a gang member to now living out his dreams. This transition points to the song "King Without a Crown." In this song, Thi'sl is communicating that he is not trying to be a king. King imagery is a staple in Hip Hop. Many emcees identify themselves as kings. They are either the king of rap which means they are the best rapper or the king of their city which means they have a level of authority within their city. Thi'sl is saying that he is a king in the sense that he is living to his potential but does not follow the popular connotations of kingship in Hip Hop. He is serving his city and he throws his crown down at the feet of the one he believes to be his ultimate king, Jesus.

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<sup>149</sup> Travis Tyler, "Snap Off," *Free from the Trap* (Full Ride Music, 2012).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

“King Without a Crown” signals the importance of St. Louis to Thi’sl. He gets very explicit about the significance of St. Louis when he says: “I love doing these all over the world, but I love doing this in St. Louis.” The song “Motivation” ties his transformation, love for his city and persuasion to the audience to get involved in their community together. The hook of the song is:

*My hood love me/they say that I’m they motivation, I’m they motivation, I’m they motivation*<sup>151</sup>

The hook communicates how his success as an emcee is inspiring his community, especially the people who live on the Westside of St. Louis. Evidence of what could have happened to him when he was hustling is in the lines:

*They could be looking down on me  
At a gravesite, all them days I’m cooking up that hard white  
Could be in the peniten’ walking out that yard life*<sup>152</sup>

Thi’sl is saying that he could have been incarcerated or dead from dealing with “hard white,” cocaine. The last lines of the last verse are:

*Now I’m focused and my plan is to rebuild my block  
Got my dawgs thinking on a whole ‘nother situation*<sup>153</sup>

Thi’sl motivates those in attendance to emulate his actions of serving St. Louis. He persuades them to also think about a different approach to serving their community by focusing on Black women and men in a lower socio-economic status and struggling to survive. Through his life, Thi’sl pointed to the audience to reach out to and serve Black people in their respective communities who are selling or using drugs, the fatherless,

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<sup>151</sup> Travis Tyler, “Motivation,” *Free from the Trap* (Full Ride Music, 2012).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

single mothers, and the jobless. Therefore, Thi'sl is leading the crowd from the concert to the corner.

Thi'sl successfully created a space that transformed linear conceptions of time and brought a diverse crowd together. He raised and donated twenty-five thousand dollars to Griffith Elementary School, which was impacted by the uprising. Thi'sl's donation to an elementary school is very similar to Flame. Thi'sl's actions were different than Flame in that Thi'sl was in the midst of the uprising while Flame was absent. Thi'sl's direct involvement with the protest and looting was crowd control and offering alternative avenues of channeling frustrations. He did not support the actions of protestors and stayed neutral until the law determined the outcome. Tef Poe took a different approach.

## **Tef Poe – Revolutionary Raptivists**

### **Who is Tef Poe? - Shared Social Significance of the Breach**

Kareem Farrakhan Jackson (Tef Poe) “comes from the bottom.” He was born in North County of St. Louis, Missouri and moved to Dellwood as a child. His mother is Pamela Berry. Anthony Berry, his stepfather, raised him because his real father went to prison. Tef Poe explained in an interview with Kinetics Live that he was “raised by rebels” to always fight against the system.<sup>154</sup> In addition to his father going to prison, his older brother is currently serving twenty-five years for one of the “biggest bank robberies

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<sup>154</sup> Kinetics Live, *TEF POE: We're Young, Black and Fed Up #Ferguson*, December 1/14, <http://kineticslive.com/2014/December-tef-poe-were-young-black-and-fed-up-ferguson/>, accessed November 5, 2015.



in St. Louis.”<sup>155</sup> Also, his uncle Stan was the founding member of the Black Panther party in St. Louis.

His childhood was marked by all of the problems of living within the proximity of “Black Ferguson.” Poe also struggled economically as an adult. The opportunity to become a Hip Hop artist was a passion of his but also provided financial stability. On November 13, 2015, Poe shared a story on Facebook about what he did in order to become a rapper that is telling of where he has been in life:

For a period of my life I Slept outside on the Metro link and used the train as my apartment, couldn't eat so I stole food from the Children's Hospital cafeteria to feed myself, went to New York got out the truck told the homies to leave me there without anywhere to sleep or a way home, took penitentiary chances- almost died doing sh\*t I can't casually blurb about on social media...<sup>156</sup>

In addition to experiencing poverty and being homeless, his cousin Gregory Franklin was killed in a police chase with the St. Louis police. The details of his death are just as obscure as the other police killings in St. Louis.<sup>157</sup> Poe raps in the song “F.A.M.E.,” “they murdered my f\*\*\*\*\* cousin.” He also talked about this while organizing during the uprising, he said: “He was barely 21, he got hit in the finger with a bullet. He lost his finger to a bullet.”<sup>158</sup>

Poe’s “bottom experiences” position him with the outsiderhood of Black Ferguson and Dellwood. Due to his relationship with this community, he is the only emcee of the three that is a part of the local community. The elements of being part of a leaderless outcaste group were in place to create this social group. Also, the issues plaguing

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Kareem Jackson , “Facebook Status Post,” November 13, 2015  
<https://www.facebook.com/tefpoe1/posts/991016394294167>, accessed November 15, 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Rebecca Roberts, “Gunfire, Police Chase Ends With Three Killed in Crash,” 9/20/12,  
<http://fox2now.com/20December/09/20/three-killed-in-police-chase-crash/>, December August 15.

<sup>158</sup> Lareisa Danielle, “tef poe / ferguson police station / mike brown peaceful candlelight vigil / riot,” August November 14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn6YeR2Quag>, accessed December 8, 2015.

Ferguson have gone on for a long time, which provided the time for them to form a social system. While Poe provided some leadership in his activism, he was not recognized as an outright leader and was still subject to marginalization. In his comments provided during “Ferguson October,” Poe stated: “I ain’t no leader man. I am just a young Black man living in an oppression system trying to find a way out of it.”<sup>159</sup> The equalitarian community bonded together in response to systemic forces that were bearing down on them.

When Poe first became an emcee, he went by “Poetic One.”<sup>160</sup> He was not satisfied with that name, which led to adding Teflon and dropping One creating “Teflon Poetic.”<sup>161</sup> Tef Poe is short for Teflon Poetic which stands for “hard rhymes” and “you can’t kill my character.”<sup>162</sup> Tef is an Ethiopian grain, thereby giving his name the connotation of “food for thought.”<sup>163</sup> Poe identifies as an independent artist and not as a “conscious rapper.” On his website, the “about” section states: “However, Tef Poe does not consider himself a ‘conscious rapper.’ Humans are complex and multidimensional. His music is a reflection of that same human experience.”<sup>164</sup> Further, in an interview with journalist Ricardo Hazell, he conveyed how he walked into a “more defined version of what being a revolutionary rap artist mean.”<sup>165</sup> Poe does not affiliate with any religion.

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<sup>159</sup> Superbrotha “TEF POE & ASHLEY YATES #Hands Up,” 10/17/14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McT\\_yie8R1U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McT_yie8R1U), accessed December 20, 2014. I was also present at the event.

<sup>160</sup> BonaFide Libra, “A BonaFide Libra Exclusive Interview with Tef Poe!!!,” 9/15/09 <https://bonafidelibra.wordpress.com/2009/09/15/a-bonafide-libra-exclusive-interview-with-tef-poe/>, accessed December 8, 2015.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> BonaFide Libra, “A BonaFide Libra Exclusive Interview with Tef Poe!!!,” and The Combat Jack Show, “The Tef Poe Episode,” <https://soundcloud.com/thecombatjackshow/the-tef-poe-episode>, accessed December 1, 2015.

<sup>163</sup> The Combat Jack Show, “The Tef Poe Episode.”

<sup>164</sup> “About,” <http://www.tefpoe.com/about/>, accessed December 23, 2014.

<sup>165</sup> Ricardo Hazell, “Rapper/Activist Tef Poe interviewed by Journalist Ricardo A. Hazell,” August 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIztjZidyaE>, accessed December 1, 2015.

He raises questions about a religious identity that engage with multiple world views in the context of Black history and suffering. He raps about the Holy Ghost, being led by God, and calls god a woman. The Bible is on the album cover of *War Machine 3* but in the “Intro” he raps “Religion can’t free me/I don’t need the Bible.”<sup>166</sup> He also has a snippet on the album *War Machine 3* quoting the classical Five-Percent worldview. On January 12, 2012, he posted a very popular YouTube video “Why I Hate Religion but Love Jesus” on his blog.<sup>167</sup>

### **Tef Poe’s Understanding of the Problem**

Tef Poe’s childhood points to his recognition of the “system” as the problem and Blacks in St. Louis are in a war with this system. In an interview with Al Sharpton on MSNBC, Poe clarifies that the overarching problems are not just in Ferguson but in “St. Louis County as a whole.”<sup>168</sup> Poe details the components of the system are colonialism, sexism, homophobia, religion, poor education, corrupt state and local government, unfair justice system, militarized police, and various governing bodies throughout St. Louis’ 91 municipalities. Sarah Montague interviewed Tef Poe on BBC Hardtalk and asked him if he spoke with police and how Poe approached them given that quarter of the police force were Black. Poe responded by saying:

It’s not the, when we speak on things like White Supremacy and we speak on things like colonialism and imperialism in America, the suppression and oppression of minorities. We don’t speak on these things from a racial stance, we speak on these things from a systemic stance. Even how you can have a Black president in the White House. It does not matter if his skin color is Black, his allegiance is to the system.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Kareem Jackson, “Intro,” *War Machine III* (Delmar Records, 2015).

<sup>167</sup> “WHY I HATE RELIGION...,” 1/December 2012, <http://www.tefpoe.com/20December 01/why-i-hate-religion/>, accessed December 5, 2015.

<sup>168</sup> Al Sharpton, *Local Musician Discusses the Protests in Ferguson*, August 19/14, <http://www.msnbc.com/politicsnation/watch/local-musician-on-the-ferguson-protests-319853123971>, accessed December 8, 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Ricardo Hazell, “Rapper/Activist Tef Poe interviewed by Journalist Ricardo A. Hazell.”

Poe is explicit in this interview in naming the system as the enemy of Black people who live in Ferguson and not simply White's devaluing attitudes or actions against Blacks.

He rapped about the ways in which the system functions in one of the songs he performed "No Love Lost,"

*I swear to God, it's true (nigga)  
They buildin' prisons for you (nigga)  
So what are you gone do? (nigga)  
They puttin' steroids in your food (nigga)  
This is what you don't know (boy)  
Your ancestors were slaves (boy)  
They say I should not say nigga  
But, who you think made niggas?*

Poe is talking to "niggas" who he eventually defines as individuals that were shaped by the system. He starts these lines by describing how prisons are being built primarily for Black people. He then goes on to rap about food hormones in which he may be referring to the Food and Drug Administration allowing steroid hormones to be used in cattle since the 1950's that are known to damage humans.<sup>170</sup>

Next Poe raps about slavery which directly connects to his comments in the interview about colonialism. Poe contends that the effects of slavery are still present today, especially in St. Louis, Missouri. In songs and interviews, he talks about how "Missouri was the last state to free the slaves."<sup>171</sup> While the form of slavery that ended in the nineteenth century is no longer present, Poe asserts that remnants of that system are still present. In the song "War Cry," he raps that St. Louis Chief of Police, Sam Dotson is a "slave catcher" and St. Louis mayor, Francis Slay is a "slave master."

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<sup>170</sup> U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "Steroid Hormone Implants Used for Growth in Food-Producing Animals," 10/20/15, <http://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/SafetyHealth/ProductSafetyInformation/ucm055436.htm>, accessed December 10, 2015.

<sup>171</sup> Kareem Jackson, "Tef Poe - 'Coming Outta Missouri' Music video..," 1/9/12, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWtZ\\_A3VrQg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWtZ_A3VrQg), accessed December 10, 2015.

Poe then reveals that he is entering the conversation of the usage of the N word. He concludes by asking a question, which insinuates the system made Black people “niggas.” He defends his language in a commentary on the lyrical notation site genius.com, he states: “I wanted to end strong with a wakeup call and call to action. What better way to wake people up than some vulgar words mixed with vulgar truths?”<sup>172</sup> Poe wanted to make unconscious Black people aware of the system that is hurting them. Further, Poe is pushing for a shift from focusing on the usage of the word, to its history and how Blacks are still being treated today, especially in St. Louis. It is systemic racism that disproportionately locks Black people up, intentionally segregates Blacks to impoverished locations and kills Blacks without penalty that creates “niggas.”

“No Love Lost” also displays Poe’s view about how St. Louis Public schools function within systemic racism. He rapped:

*Ain't no love for my people, ain't no love for the system  
When they do build a school they use it to deceive 'em x 2*

Poe believes that St. Louis Public Schools do not properly educate Blacks. This is due, in part, to the state of schools in which predominately Black youth attend. As already mentioned, many of these schools are not fully performing to Missouri standards.

According to Missouri Department of Education School Report Card, Normandy High School, the school Michael Brown attended is unaccredited.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Genius, “No Love Lost LYRICS,” <http://genius.com/Tef-poe-no-love-lost-lyrics/>, accessed December 14, 2014.

<sup>173</sup> Missouri Department of Education, “District Report Card,” 2011 – 2014, <http://mcids.dese.mo.gov/guidedinquiry/School%20Report%20Card/District%20Report%20Card.aspx?rp:SchoolYear=2014&rp:SchoolYear=2013&rp:SchoolYear=2012&rp:SchoolYear=2011&rp:DistrictCode=096109>, accessed December 12, 2014.

Another component of the system that is plaguing Blacks in St. Louis is sexism. Sexism within the system is intertwined with racism. Therefore, in the song “Say Her Name,” Poe raps:

*Misogyny they give me  
When they murder off our women  
We applaud it what a pity*

Poe closes the song with a voice over saying “Rest in peace Kimberlee King,” who was mysteriously found dead in a jail cell on September 19, 2014.<sup>174</sup> Poe is communicating about the death of Black and Brown women who are being killed by the police. He dedicated a song and created a music video (Say Her Name), because in addition to how deeply sexism and racism impact Black and Brown women, their story was being lost in a Black male oriented narrative. The world knew about Michael Brown. Those in America who were following the uprising knew about Vonderrit Myers. A small number of people knew about Kimberlee King, measured by the dearth of news stories, social media activity on Facebook and Twitter and views on YouTube (only 229 views).<sup>175</sup>

American Christianity is a thriving religion that perpetuates systemic racism in America in general and St. Louis in particular according to Poe. In “No Love Lost,” he rapped:

*They told me that Jesus was white, so the story begins  
Why do they lie to my people, give us hope through religion?*

Poe is addressing the inherent racism that is present in American Christianity. This is not a contemporary Hip Hop perspective. Charise Cheney, in *Brothers Gonna Work it*

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<sup>174</sup> Nicholas Phillips, “Why Did This 21-Year-Old Woman Die in the Pagedale Jail?,” 7/2/15, <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/newsblog/2015/07/02/why-did-this-21-year-old-woman-die-in-the-pagedale-jail>, December August 15.

<sup>175</sup> IBWC KC, “10-25-14 Mysterious Death Of Kim King in St Louis County Jail?,” 10/26/14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GQTncNryfM>, accessed December 8, 2015.

*Out*, articulates that rap nationalists in the early 1990's called Christianity the "white man's religion" or the "slave-master's religion."<sup>176</sup> The primary concern some rappers have had with Christianity is the founding fathers believe it was God's will to have the land and provide the labor force to work the land.<sup>177</sup> Cheney points to Poor Righteous Teachers and Ice Cube:

As a product of the "rich slave makers of the world" and the "bloodsuckers of the poor," they insisted that Christianity is harmful to psychological and material well-being of Black communities, particularly, as Ice Cub maintains, after "400 years of getting' our ass kicked/by so-called Christians and Catholics."<sup>178</sup>

Poe portrayed this understanding of Christianity. He believes that people can receive strength from spirituality but has a problem when religion is being used to hurt people.<sup>179</sup> This point was further driven home when Poe witnessed a group of protestors who supported Officer Darren Wilson and carried signs bearing the verse Matthew 5:9 during the uprising.<sup>180</sup> Their actions repeated those supporting slavery and used the Bible for its justification.

As a result of the system, Poe deems that Blacks in St. Louis are in a war. He uses this language in his writings, songs and interviews. He has three albums in a series entitled "War Machine." The hook of his song "Lend Me Your Ear" is "It's a war here and nobody to fear/ Listen to that struggle, cause we all shed a tear."<sup>181</sup> After Brown's killing and the lack of response from Jay Nixon, Poe released a song called

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<sup>176</sup> Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*, 129.

<sup>177</sup> Lee Baker in *From Savage to Negroe* states: "Religious doctrines inspired both colonization and malicious destruction of indigenous people's lives, land, and culture. It was God's will. John Winthrop, who established the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1630, claimed that the smallpox epidemic of 1617 was God's way of "thinning out" the Indians "to make room for the Puritans (12)."

<sup>178</sup> Cheney, *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*, 128.

<sup>179</sup> On the cite <http://genius.com/1524446/Tef-poe-no-love-lost/Why-do-they-lie-to-my-people-give-us-hope-through-religion> he provided feedback about that specific line.

<sup>180</sup> Jon Swaine, "A silent protest in support of Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, who shot Mike Brown, starting in St. Louis," <http://www.scoopnest.com/user/jonswaine/501125653932941312>, accessed December 23, 2014

<sup>181</sup> Kareem Jackson, "Lend Me your Ear," *Cheer for the Villain* (Indie, 2014).

“War Cry.” Poe arrived at this place as a result of living in Dellwood, which is the area closest to “Black Ferguson.”

In an interview with Kinetics Live, Poe explained how it was normal for St. Louis Police departments to respond with SWAT gear.<sup>182</sup> The regular presence of a militarized police force solidifies Poe’s notion of being in a war with the state. The militarization of St. Louis Police departments also includes their policing tactics. In an interview with Al Sharpton on MSNBC, Poe shared an instance in which he was stopped by a police officer and the officer just “asked me, where is the guns and where is the dope.” Poe went on to say: “He didn’t ask me my name, he didn’t ask me for my driver’s license. That’s all he wanted to know.”<sup>183</sup> Black people in St. Louis are in a war.

### **Tef Poe’ Social Inclusiveness with the Crisis**

Tef Poe was in Ferguson and on the scene of the uprising August 9, 2014. He was actively involved in protesting the system. Based on his involvement with the response, Poe shares how the surrounding police departments prepared for the uprising and their treatment of Brown’s body and blood. Poe also discussed his view on violent protesting and presented a more nuanced perspective.

Poe participated in the uprising in several ways. On August 9, he was a part of a peaceful sit-in in the middle of the street in front of the Ferguson Police Department.<sup>184</sup> He also led rhythmic marches against the system. They were performed with a bull horn and a drum accompanist. Some of the chants were:

*I believe/That we/ Will win*

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<sup>182</sup>Kinetics Live, *TEF POE: We’re Young, Black and Fed Up #Ferguson*.

<sup>183</sup> Al Sharpton, *Local Musician Discusses the Protests in Ferguson*.

<sup>184</sup> Al Sharpton, *Local Musician Discusses the Protests in Ferguson*.



*You can't stop the revolution*<sup>185</sup>

Since Poe viewed the situation as a war, they were chanting that they will win the battle against the system. Success will be defined as a revolution from an oppressed group of people. They created a completely new approach in rebelling. During his speech at the rally at “Ferguson October,” he described how a group of people were protesting the system on a nightly basis, he said: “We’ve been here for 65 days and counting.” Poe’s involvement with this community elucidates the shift from normative *communitas* to spontaneous *communitas*. The crisis led to an eruption from the bottom that created a sustained community effort of resistance.

Poe’s first social media post on August 9, 2014 at 5:09 pm stated:

“Unarmed means unarmed we’re talking life or death here ... People act like deadly force is a passive term but if you’re going to kill someone be protected legally .. Then you should also know without a shadow of a doubt that they were willing to kill you.”<sup>186</sup>

Poe’s first post directly entered the conversation between armed or unarmed and violent or non-violent resistance. Poe’s dissatisfaction with the system aided in his understanding of how frustrated many people in his community were, but his rhetoric at the beginning of the uprising was condemning of “violent” protest. His focus was to provide an avenue for his community to express their emotions peacefully. Poe was clear that “violence” at the beginning of the uprising meant the burning down of stores.

Poe’s perspective on whether or not they should have used violence is unclear. While he initially condemned it on the grounds, he speaks differently in various

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<sup>185</sup> I only have video footage from the protest that has not be archived.

<sup>186</sup> Tef Poe, Facebook Status, August 9/14, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10203706508455518&id=1601933824](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10203706508455518&id=1601933824), accessed December 10, 2015.

scenarios. On interviews, such as the one with Al Sharpton, he was not in favor of violent protest, but in his music, he goes to the other extreme. In several songs he raps about having burners and obtaining bigger guns. Further, in the song “Say Her Name,” which is on the album *War Machine 3*, released July 14, 2015, he raps: “I ride for my niggas when they burning down the store/Throw a brick through the window if they let this thing go.”<sup>187</sup> There are several possibilities to explain his view of the “violent” actions of the protestors. One is that Poe performs differently in different scenarios. His presentation of his view on MSNBC will be different then the liberty he may feel he has on the album. Another possibility could be that after time has passed and he has created a different understanding of the situation, his view of the “looting” and “burning” may have shifted.

The immediate police response clearly impacted Poe’s perspective on the usage of violence. He recognized that the people of Ferguson could not win an armed struggle against the militarized St. Louis Police departments. He explained in several interviews how police officers from different jurisdictions arrived on the scene. It was clear by how prepared they were that the people of Ferguson could not win a firearms battle. Given that they were already militarized, they arrived with all of their military equipment, tanks, shotguns, bullet proof vests, night vision goggles and several other pieces of equipment. The militarized police presence led Poe to share in an interview that Ferguson “is literally like Baghdad.”<sup>188</sup> He was depicting a place that consisted of bombs, assault rifles firing, tear gas being used and tanks riding around.

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<sup>187</sup> Kareem Jackson, “Say Her Name,” *War Machine III* (Delmar Records, 2015).

<sup>188</sup> TakePart Live, “Michael Brown Shooting: “This Place Is A Warzone” | TakePart Live,” August November 14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kov1MnNxYLg>, accessed December 8, 2015.

The militarized Ferguson Police department's maltreatment of Michael Brown's body affected Poe the most. When he arrived at Canfield, the body was already removed but Brown's blood was still present. Poe concludes that the St. Louis Police departments treated Brown like an animal. In the interview with Kinetics Live, the impact on Poe was noticeable in his discussion of their actions. He shared:

On my way back across the street, I looked down and I see a puddle of Mike Brown's blood in the middle of the street. That's when it really hit me that they had just killed somebody and they didn't even like serve him any dignity to wash his blood out the street. They left his body in the street but they also left his blood in the street. That's an aspect of the story people don't tell. ... You can remove the body but that blood was still sending a sign that we shoot you, we killed you and we don't give a damn. ... That's not what you do to a human.<sup>189</sup>

The militarized police treated Brown's body like he did not matter. Poe's narrative elucidates how the remaining blood echoed that sentiment to the people of Ferguson. Poe simply, yet powerfully, concludes his comments by defining Brown's killing as: "state sponsored murder."<sup>190</sup>

### **Tef Poe's Performance Solutions/Activism/Mechanism**

Poe asserts that Blacks need to fight the whole system in order to be free and obtain a full recognition of their humanity. Since the system is expansive, Poe believes the response should also include Black's emotion and the privileging of the poor Blacks in American society. He contends that the "Black American freedom struggle is deeply attached to all forms of oppression on planet Earth."<sup>191</sup> During Ferguson October, Poe said: "It is my job to say what Pookie and Ray Ray would say if they were up here."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Kinetics Live, *TEF POE: We're Young, Black and Fed Up #Ferguson*.

<sup>190</sup> Kinetics Live, *TEF POE: We're Young, Black and Fed Up #Ferguson*.

<sup>191</sup> Kareem Jackson, "Ferguson Represents The Shot Heard Around The World..." 9/2015, <http://newsone.com/3165844/tef-poe-on-capitalism-ferguson-reflections-one-year-later/>, accessed December 8, 2015.

<sup>192</sup> Superbrotha "TEF POE & ASHLEY YATES #Hands Up," 10/17/14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McT\\_yie8R1U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McT_yie8R1U), accessed December 20, 2014. I was also present at the event.

Therefore, he situates the revolution among the poor Blacks in racialized spaces and links the struggle with others around the world.

Poe's mechanisms involved marching on the frontlines during protests, community organizing, writing articles, conducting interviews and performing on stage. As already mentioned, from the beginning of the crisis to an elaborate response during the redressive action phase, Poe protested against the system. Furthermore, he teamed up with Tory Russell to start Hands Up United. Hands Up United "is a collective of politically engaged minds building towards the liberation of oppressed Black, Brown and poor people through education, art, civil disobedience, advocacy and agriculture."<sup>193</sup>

Poe then teamed up with several groups such as Amnesty International, Organization for Black Struggle, Justice for Reggie and Millennial Activists United to put on organized events of resistance such as Ferguson October. As already explained, Ferguson October was a weekend of resistance that included the concert Poe performed at "Hip Hop and Resistance" and Moral Monday, in which Poe was arrested while protesting.<sup>194</sup> The organizers of Ferguson October organized it in such a way that activism intertwined with artistry.

The "Hip Hop and Resistance" concert was held on October 12, 2014 at the Fubar in downtown St. Louis, from 1:00 pm to 6:00 pm. The Fubar is also an intimate venue with a capacity of five hundred people. Since the concert was a part of Ferguson October, the target audience was those who were present for the weekend of events.

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<sup>193</sup> "Theory-Practice-Program," <http://www.handsupunited.org/theory-practice-programs/>, accessed December 10, 2015.

<sup>194</sup> Daniel Hill, "Tef Poe Arrested During Ferguson Protests," 10/14/14, [http://blogs.riverfronttimes.com/rftmusic/2014/10/tef\\_poe\\_arrested\\_during\\_ferguson\\_protests.php](http://blogs.riverfronttimes.com/rftmusic/2014/10/tef_poe_arrested_during_ferguson_protests.php), accessed December 8, 2015. Moral Monday was a planned day of moral resistance through protesting. It was the culminating point of the week after the rally, meetings and conferences.

The stage at the Fubar was massive. There was enough space for Poe's entire crew to move and the DJ with his equipment to fit. The crowd was standing room only. Similar to most Hip Hop concerts, the main lights were off and the lighting came from green background lighting. This lighting scheme allowed for the attention to be on Poe.

In addition to the stage, the prominent materials were their clothes, the sound system and the DJ equipment. Poe and his crew were wearing clothes that would easily identify them with the Hip Hop culture, with the exception of Rockwell Knuckles.<sup>195</sup> The clothes they wore were a form of resistance. Poe's shirt proclaimed: "No One is Free while others are Oppressed."<sup>196</sup> Poe's shirt vocalized the oppression of the people of St. Louis. Poe posits that the existence of oppression in St. Louis broadens the problem to those outside of St. Louis, to those struggling around the world. At the same time, Poe's shirt suggests that if others around the world are oppressed then Americans should join in their struggle as well.

Poe performed "No Love Lost," "Swag," and "Hog in the Lane" with Rockwell Knuckles. "No Love Lost" and "Swag" have steady beats that are serious in nature. The feel of these songs are not celebratory, rather an expression of frustration and pent down emotions. "Hog in the Lane" created a different atmosphere that lend more to dancing. Interestingly, "No Love Lost" was produced before the night of the event; during Poe's performance, he did not change the beat. Therefore, the rhythm of the

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<sup>195</sup> Hip Hop fashion is constantly changing making it difficult to stay abreast with the latest style. Also, different areas around the country have different styles. Rockwell may have on clothes that fit within what is worn in St. Louis.

<sup>196</sup> The author is unknown. I am unaware of who originally came up with the statement.

performance on October 12, 2014 was being created by producer ChaseTheMoney<sup>197</sup> before January 2013 (when the song was released).

The recorded music contributes new understandings to performance and *communitas*. Performance scholars agree that a performance cannot repeat exactly the same way it was performed before.<sup>198</sup> The music obfuscates this notion. While the emcee may not do the same exact movements and words at the same exact time, the music will always be the same. The prerecorded beats elucidate surrogation. ChaseTheMoney was influenced by Hip Hop before he created the music. Although he was not at the performance, his creation contributed to embodied movements.

Based on Poe's inclusiveness with the breach and the crisis, an analysis of his performance of "No Love Lost" exemplifies his overall performance. The first words that he exclaimed were "F\*\*\* the police! I can say that because I actually went out there and said that to they f\*\*\*ing face, f\*\*\* the police!" All of the anger, fury, rage and indignation that Poe and those involved with the *communitas* experienced at the hands of the system were boisterously pronounced in that statement. The primary theme of the song is if the City of St. Louis and America does not care about them, then they don't care about St. Louis and America.

Poe's exclamation of f\*\*\* the police, points to the direct link between his performance and protesting and surrogation. He asserts that the only reason he can say f\*\*\* the police in concert is because he has been involved with the uprising. Poe insinuates that a declaration that is not backed up by action is meaningless. Further, f\*\*\*

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<sup>197</sup> I could not find his real name, I was able to find his name as a producer on the credits.

<sup>198</sup> Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead* states: "The paradox of the restoration of behavior resides in the phenomenon of repetition itself: no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance" (29). This perspective has been carried on throughout performance studies.

the police was the name of a song by N.W.A., on the album *Straight Outta Compton*. Poe's statement channels N.W.A. and the raptivists who came before him that have been fighting the system. In the song "Dice Roll," he explicitly states: "Ice Cube made me mother f\*\*\*\*." <sup>199</sup> This means that he has been directly influenced by Ice Cube who was one of the members of N.W.A.

When Poe shouted f\*\*\* the police, he threw his hand forward. Hand motions were highly visible and prominent throughout the performance. He moved his right hand back and forth, up and down and in rhythm with the music. He also moved his right hand in a forward throwing motion and made short quick movements during the breaks of the beat. His crew made similar motions. The crowd also maintained the cultural memory of Hip Hop by having their hands up during the performance. In addition to hand motions, Poe and his crew threw up signs. This is evidence of codified language which only the people who made the sign would understand. The clearly identifiable semiotics that Poe and his crew flashed was the Black power fist.

Near the end of the first verse, Poe has two lines about his cousin Greg who was killed by the police. At this point, he holds up his right fist. Therefore, while Hip Hop culture was being re-produced, African American culture was also being re-produced. Poe's posture of holding his right fist straight up places him within a larger movement of what Tricia Rose calls "a communal African American social discourse." <sup>200</sup> This social discourse is a part of the Black freedom struggle. Poe emerges from a long history of

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<sup>199</sup> Kareem Jackson, "Dice Role," *War Machine III* (Delmar Records, 2015).

<sup>200</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

Africans throughout the Diaspora fighting for equality.<sup>201</sup> His raising of his right fist symbolizes a conjurer channeling the ancient ancestor spirits the Africans worshipped. He also aligns with abolitionists such as Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs who wrote and fought to abolish slavery. Poe was “reversing the gaze” similar to Ida Wells who also publicized lynching photos as a means to display White violence. Poe declared that he is willing to do whatever it takes to bring freedom to the oppressed of Ferguson. This declaration is similar to Malcom X’s declaration of “any means necessary.”

Further, while Poe claims: “This is not your momma’s civil rights movement,” in positioning himself within the Black freedom struggle; he is connected to the freedom fighters of the 1950’s and 1960’s. Vincent Harding’s discussion about the freedom struggle during this time highlights how they too were looking for holistic freedom. He contends that:

[I]t was only in the context of the ongoing movement of black struggle, changing and yet continuing, that we could speak adequately of black radicalism. Now I understand it as that element of the movement that at any given moment in our history develops the most fundamental challenge to the social, economic, political, spiritual, or intellectual domination of white people and their power over black lives.<sup>202</sup>

Harding is arguing for a holistic understanding of the Black freedom struggle. Focusing on particular movements within the Black freedom struggle, such as the post-Civil Rights Movement, is too myopic and does not connect contemporary struggles with the long history of freedom fighters or racialized injustice. This is exactly what Poe is fighting for and the long line of soldiers that he is falling in to.

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<sup>201</sup> I draw this notion from Derrick Alridge in his chapter “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas.” He recognizes the Black Freedom Struggle as part of a larger African and global struggle to alleviate the oppression of people of color (54).

<sup>202</sup> Harding, *There is a River*, xx.



During the performance, right before the Bridge/Outro, when Poe is rapping about “niggas,” the performance reaches entrainment. The music hits a crescendo. Poe and his crew hold up the Black Power fist, they start by repeating the chorus (if its f\*\*\* me, then its f\*\*\* you). While repeating the chorus and holding up their fist, synchronized with the music and lyrics, they put up their middle finger. They all in unison repeat the chorus one more time, while Poe goes into the crowd. Right as he takes his place in the crowd, the beat picks back up, and they say the chorus one more time, but this time the crew starts jumping. Now, Poe is in the crowd, the music drops and his voice is magnified.

He then started the outro. Some people rapped along and the words acted as a combustible, igniting the flames of disgust to towards the racist system. This led to shouts of “turn up” and “heeey.” Some people may have recalled loved ones or friends who were in prison. Some people may have thought of their disgust for fast food. The baseline is knocking and everyone is jumping in rhythm. This section/scene culminates in a portion of the crowd along with Poe exclaiming “But who you think made niggas!” They recognized how the “system” intentionally discarded them. The actions of the system up to October 12, 2014 increased their distrust of it.

Poe’s performance of “No Love Lost” blurred the lines of Hip Hop and activism. He illustrated a different narrative that, before Michael Brown’s murder, was relatively obscure to the rest of America. His prior activism, his commitment to the city of St. Louis and the greater African American community catapulted Poe to testify before the United Nations Committee on Torture. Poe’s activism is part of a larger fight against social injustice.

## **Reintegration or Schism - Conclusion**

The non-indictment of Wilson on November 24, 2014 led to another “crisis” and St. Louis stayed in the redressive action phase. The response by the Ferguson police department was the “same old song.” They shot tear gas and arrested and harassed peaceful protestors. Furthermore, several Blacks were killed and police officers were not indicted. The most demoralizing case was the non-indictment of Daniel Pantaleo. His murder of Eric Garner in New York was recorded on the phone of a bystander, yet he was not indicted.

A group of activist including Ashley Yates - co-founder of Millennial Activists United, Rasheen Aldridge - Young Activists St. Louis, Brittany Packnett - St. Louis educator and raptivist, T-Dubb-O - St. Louis hip-hop artist, James Hayes - Ohio Students Association, Phillip Agnew - Dream Defenders, and Jose Lopez - Make the Road New York, met with President Barak Obama on December 1, 2014. As a result: “Obama announced a \$263 million community policing initiative, which includes \$75 million for body cameras to around 50,000 police officers.”<sup>203</sup> Yates expressed concern with the usage of body cameras because Garner’s killing was recorded. The nihilism that West elucidates reveal that many Blacks feel like things will never change.

Flame, Thi’sl and Tef Poe, as raptivists’, draw from their backgrounds and community involvement to offer a unique perspective on the systemic issues that plague racialized bodies and places. Flame and Thi’sl, as Christians in Hip Hop, have the potential to offer an enduring hope to the Black freedom struggle. The challenge they

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<sup>203</sup> Democracy Now, “The Root is Racism in America: Ferguson Activist Speaks Out on Police Abuses After Meeting Obama,” December 2/14, [http://www.democracynow.org/2014/December/2/the\\_root\\_is\\_racism\\_in\\_america](http://www.democracynow.org/2014/December/2/the_root_is_racism_in_america), accessed December 10, 2015.

face is how to offer a communal hope that addresses the system directly and transcends individualized notions of salvation.

Poe points to solidarity with oppressed people around country that are at war with the state.<sup>204</sup> He spent time in Brazil training and looking for non-American perspectives on how to get free.<sup>205</sup> Poe illuminates the possibility for Hip Hop to not only work within a pan-African framework but with Blacks and Browns. Therefore, more scholarship can be done on the international link between Hip Hop's fight against systemic and institutional oppression and Black and Brown racialized bodies undergoing state sanctioned violence. Another question to consider is what is Hip Hop's maximum potential in bringing social change? These three Black male Hip Hop emcees have confronted what they perceive the problem to be in St. Louis and around the country. What are the ways in which woman Hip Hoppers are resisting the system? When considering men and women, national and international activism, is Hip Hop the embodiment of the contemporary Black and Brown Freedom Struggle?

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<sup>204</sup> Kinetics Live, *TEF POE: We're Young, Black and Fed Up #Ferguson*.

<sup>205</sup> Ricardo Hazell, *Rapper/Activist Tef Poe interviewed by Journalist Ricardo A. Hazell*.

## Appendix A

"I just want to write and say THANK YOU for the wonderful event you planned for today. I made my first visit to Ferguson today and have to say that I was a bit apprehensive but I knew from the moment I heard about this that God was asking me to be a part of it. So I hopped in my car and drove into your wonderful community today. What a great time I had there. Stopping at the park and visiting with some of the people there. Getting my tee shirt and map and heading out for my shopping. First stop was to the Corner Coffee House to get my cuppa joe. What a great coffee house. Definitely heading back there again. A very nice young man waited on me and said it was a great Saturday and he hadn't seen it so busy in there in the whole time he has worked there. Yay. Then on to do some shopping and drive around a bit. There is a lot of personality in Ferguson. I loved looking at the streets, the homes, the people. So many signs supporting their city. It made me smile. To drive back into the park and see the people at the entrance just smiling and welcoming people, true joy. I loved seeing the parking lot full and people getting into and out of their cars. What a great thing you did today. Thank you. I will definitely be back to eat at a few of the restaurants and definitely visit the coffee house. I have already gotten ahold of some friends to plan a girls trip there. I wish the media would spend more time with all the cameras on events like this one. Events helping the community and showing the pride people have in their homes and towns. There is so much good and all we hear is the bad. It's a shame. May God continue to shine on you and bless you as you continue to bless others. His will is being done through you and so many others. Have a glorious week ahead."

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### Education

Present	PhD Student in American Studies Program, College of William and Mary
2016	MA in American Studies, College of William and Mary Michael Blakey, Thesis Advisor Thesis Title: Putin' on for Da Lou: Hip Hop's Response to Racism in St. Louis
2012	Community Scholars Program University of Virginia
2011	M.Div. Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University Thesis Title: Listen Up: Why the Church and Academia Should Study and Embrace Holy Hip Hop
2006	B.A. in Religious Studies, University of Virginia

### Editorial Experience

Present	Associate and Copy Editor, <i>Journal of Hip Hop Studies</i>
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### Teaching Experience

Fall 2015 - Present	Graduate Teaching Assistant, <i>Introduction to Film Festivals, History &amp; Production</i> (FMST 370-04)
Fall 2015	Graduate Teaching Assistant, <i>Video Production: Teaching &amp; Learning</i> (FMST 370-02)

## **Educational Programming Experience**

Fall 2015 - Assistant Director, *Global Film Festival*  
Present

2014 – Graduate Assistant, *Lemon Project* at The College of William and Mary  
2015

## **Publications**

Forthcoming “They Got Me Trapped: Structural Inequality & Racism in Space and Place within  
June 2016 Urban School System Design” in *Addressing Environmental and Food Justice toward Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Poisoning and Imprisoning Youth*, Anthony Nocella (ed.) Palgrave

2013 “Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae’s contribution to Hip Hop” in *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* (Vol. 1, Issue 1)

## **Academic Conference Presentations**

March *An Examination of Blacks in Williamsburg During “Reconstruction,”* Lemon Project  
2016 Annual Symposium, Williamsburg, VA

November *Performing Resistance: Hip Hop’s Fight Against Institutional Racism in St. Louis,*  
2015 *Missouri*, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA

March Panel Discussion: *Music and Justice*, Festival of Faith and Music, Grand Rapids,  
2015 MI

March *Hip Hop’s Activism: From “Represent” to “Welcome to America,”: An Exploration*  
2015 *of Hip Hop’s Role in Furthering the Cause of Justice*, Festival of Faith and Music, Grand Rapids, MI

## **Guest Lectures**

November *Hip Hop, an Introduction and Connection to Religion*, Delaware State University,  
2015 HIST 204 “African American History from 1865”

November *Black Lives Matter and the Black Freedom Struggle*, Lee University, HUMN 493

2015            “African American Literature & Culture”

### **Grants and Fellowships**

2014 –            *Graduate Studies and Research Recruitment Fellowship*, College of William and  
2016            Mary, \$6,000

### **Awards**

2014 –            *Original Group Effort Image Award*, College of William and Mary Campus Chapter  
2015            of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

### **Service – Local, Organizations**

Present            *Organizer*, Black Lives Matter, Williamsburg, VA

2008 -            *Vice President and Member*, Interfaith Movement Promoting Change Together  
2010            (I.M.P.A.C.T.), Charlottesville, VA

### **Related Professional Experience**

Present            *Ordained Minister*, First Baptist Church, Charlottesville, VA

Ordained October 20, 2013

2007 –            *Chaplain Candidate*, United States Army Reserves, Richmond, VA  
2013