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## We Just Want My People Thriving: Hip Hop as a Catalyst for Social Change in St. Louis

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## **We Just Want My People Thriving: Hip Hop as a Catalyst for Social Change in St. Louis**

St. Louis, regularly listed as one of the most segregated cities in the United States, has long been a hotbed of racial tension. As a current resident of St. Louis County, and a former resident of a subsection of St. Louis County called Ferguson, I have witnessed the havoc a history of racism, segregation and violence can wreak on a community. The silver lining of such an environment is the resulting creative talent that focuses its efforts on chronicling its surroundings. In this case, local artists have sought to illustrate St. Louis' complicated history and uncertain future. It has always been home to a vibrant music scene dating back to the heyday of jazz and blues in the 1950's, and now, hip hop. Since hip hop is rooted in innovation and rebellion, it is the genre of choice for social and political activism as well as revolution and change. By chronicling the African American experience in the face of institutional oppression and systemic racism, hip hop has become undeniably important to cities like St. Louis. In the past, critics have been quick to undermine hip hop's social significance and academic merit, pointing to some of the foul language and violent images that have unfairly become synonymous with the genre. However, there is great peril in dismissing or ignoring some of hip hop's social and political messages and threats. St. Louis' hip hop scene can be used as a tool to measure the sentiments of African Americans inhabiting the city if those in positions of power pay close attention to trending issues addressed in lyrics. In turn, studying hip hop can prevent future instances of civil unrest because politicians and community leaders will be more wary of concerns among the

African American community, and thus, create a platform to breathe new life into a city on the verge of collapse.

### **St. Louis' History of Institutional Racism and Segregation**

To better comprehend the social consequences of ignoring hip hop, it is important to understand how St. Louis' current political and social climate came to be, as well as how these factors contributed to the city's current failing economic state. St. Louis' complex race relations date back to the 1800s with the peak of the slave trade (Smith). Because St. Louis was in a border state that permitted slavery, there was regular contact between slaves and free blacks as well as whites whose ideology clashed with that of slave owners (Smith). The city was where the Dred Scott case was first filed. The Dred Scott decision reinforced the idea that blacks were property than people who could become citizens of the United States, and it also precluded the federal government from overruling the state laws regarding slavery. These historical factors contributed to the 1917 race riots in nearby East St. Louis. During World War I, the United States was desperate to find factory workers to work in wartime industries which infuriated many whites in the area. What ensued was the clubbing, stabbing and lynching of blacks which resulted in driving 6,000 African Americans from their homes and the death of 48 people in total (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). Though St. Louis' modern racial divide would likely never reach such an extreme peak, race has lingered as a divisive, sociological issue in St. Louis to this day.

The starkest example of the racial divide in St. Louis is the infamous Delmar Divide. Delmar is a major road that runs east-west through St. Louis. It is also the

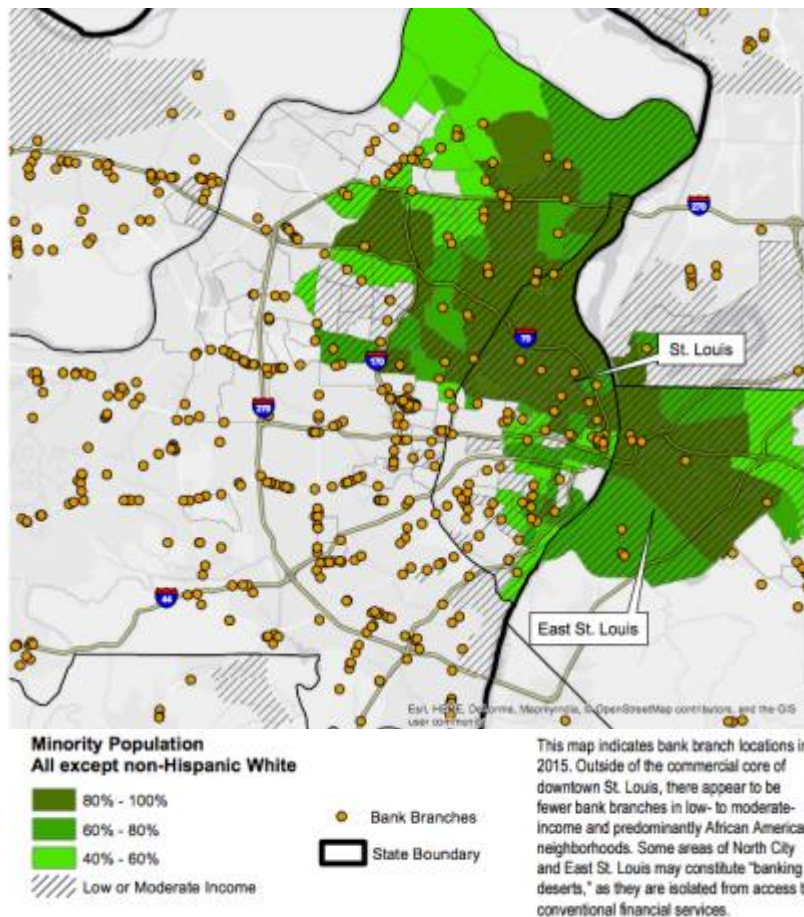
divider that marks one of the most poignant examples of segregation in the United States. Just to the south of Delmar is a neighborhood that is 70% white with median home values upwards of \$310,000 (Washington University in St. Louis and Saint Louis University). If one were to turn north on Delmar, they'd enter a completely different world. The area immediately north of Delmar has a median home value of \$78,000 and is 99% black (Washington University in St. Louis and Saint Louis University). Modern segregation can be a much deeper issue than it appears on the surface. Its consequences are much more complex than two groups of people simply avoiding one another. It can result in a vicious cycle of poverty as the quality of area schools is linked to property values with property taxes funding public schools. This doesn't necessarily apply in the case of north and south Delmar since the two areas are adjacent to another, but the link to income and quality of education is apparent in other areas of St. Louis. Moreover, I have never known a resident of the south side of Delmar to attend a public school in the first place. The south side of Delmar is widely known as the Central West End. It is an area flush with small businesses, restaurants and shopping. Some of the neighborhoods are gated on multiple sides to prevent the easy entry of outsiders. There have also been reports of anyone looking "out-of-place" south of Delmar being unlawfully harassed by police and subsequently sent to the north side of Delmar, as if the area north of Delmar is some sort of dumping ground for "suspect" characters (Harlan). As a resident of St. Louis, I visited some homes of friends in the Central West End and, nearly half of the time, I was approached by a vigilant officer who questioned me. I don't think the officers had any malicious intent as they were polite once I name-dropped my friend that resided in the area. But, I have my suspicions as to why they

approached me, a black male, rather than some of the other occupied cars nearby. The officers that confronted me were likely in the area because of an initiative in the Central West End taken by residents to pay an extra tax to have off-duty police officers patrol the area by night (Harlan). Meanwhile, the area immediately north of Delmar has the typical markings of a neighborhood hit hard by economic downturn. There's the typical dilapidated corner stores, abundance of liquor stores, vacant homes that appear to be on the verge of crumbling and cheap, fast food restaurants.

### **St. Louis' Modern Day Redlining and Its Roots**

There are other obvious signs of a city divided than the Delmar Divide. The National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC) is a non-profit organization that works with community leaders and banks to advocate for fair housing and banking. In July 2016, the organization did a study on the home loan activity in St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. The results were shocking. The NCRC concluded that, "there is evidence of extensive segregation (NCRC 5)", in the city. However, a less obvious conclusion was, "the racial composition of the neighborhood is a strong predictor of mortgage activity, becoming nearly as important as neighborhood income in its predictive capability" (NCRC 5). Suddenly, the post-modern segregation issue that St. Louis faces make a lot more sense. It may seem logical to jump to the conclusion that this difference in lending activity could be explained by a simple difference in income. However, it's clear that more loans are flowing through predominantly white neighborhoods with similar income profiles and not predominantly African-American neighborhoods. Because they don't have the same access to lending, African

Americans in St. Louis are often unable to move into predominantly white neighborhoods and diversify these communities. The most significant factor reinforcing St. Louis' modern day redlining is the sheer lack of brick and mortar financial institutions near any predominantly African-American neighborhoods. Black people often don't even have easy access to actual banks. The map to the left from the NCRC study regarding mortgage lending in St. Louis shows branches of financial institutions as well as the racial composition of St. Louis. West of St. Louis is known to be one of the wealthier, less diverse parts of the St. Louis area. As seen in the map, banks are in abundance in



the area, literally stacked on top of one another. As you start to move north east, the number of financial institutions significantly declines. The decline is so steep that there are quite literally no banks in north St. Louis city and only a handful in all East St. Louis.

This present-day inequality is the extension of a long history of redlining in St. Louis. Redlining is the practice of making it extremely difficult or impossible for people to

obtain loans based on factors other than their creditworthiness, such as race or income level of their residence. In *The Making of Ferguson*, Richard Rothstein argues that the

city's long history of segregation and racial tension is a direct result of the redlining that financial institutions and real estate companies openly practiced until the 1960's. Additionally, he concludes that not only did the local, state and federal government fail to inhibit segregated housing, they supported it. Like many major cities in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, St. Louis' many episodes of white flight were expedited by the practice of blockbusting, further supporting St. Louis epidemic of segregation. When blockbusting, real estate speculators would scare households into selling their homes for cheap prices due to fear of falling property values accompanied with African Americans moving into the neighborhood. The speculators would then buy the house and sell it at a higher price to African Americans in need of housing (Rothstein). Additionally, the Real Estate Exchange adopted a policy in the mid 1920's that forbade real estate agents from helping introduce, "members of any race or nationality ... whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood" (Rothstein). The federal government shares a great deal of fault in the creation of St. Louis segregated housing situation as they just sat by idly as heavily regulated industries such as banking and insurance had similar policies. One case of segregation against the First National Bank of St. Louis was just recently settled in 2012 when the bank finally opened its promised branch in Ferguson (Rothstein).

### **St. Louis' Economic Downturn**

To understand how St. Louis became one of the United States' faces of modern segregation requires a bit of historical knowledge about the city itself. The city of St. Louis could be the posterchild for deindustrialization and the economic effect that the



migration of large corporations and jobs can have on the city and its residents. The Populist and Progressive movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led to an abundance of legislative safeguards for small businesses and prevented the monopolization of financial institutions and other industries that spurred economic growth in St. Louis (Feldman). For example, the McFadden Act protected small banks by confining the lending activity of national banks to their respective headquartered states (Feldman). Acts like these in other industries were common in the early 1900s and led to a boom in small business in St. Louis. New legislation protected local supermarkets, pharmacies, and restaurants. However, Washington D.C.'s love affair with small business was short-lived. By the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter signed legislation that resulted in a huge overhaul of the airline industry. St. Louis was home to the headquarters of two airlines: Ozark Airlines and Trans World Airlines (TWA), which was the stadium sponsor of the local professional football team, the St. Louis Rams, from 1995 until 2001. TWA gobbled up Ozark Airlines in 1986 before it filed for bankruptcy before it was eventually bought out by American Airlines in 2001 (Grant). According to a *St. Louis Post Dispatch* article analyzing St. Louis' economic fall, "Between 1980 and 1985, 62 Fortune 500 companies were subject to corporate takeovers, and the single greatest increase in corporate acquisitions in U.S. history took place between 1984 and 1985" (Feldman). No longer were the small business that spurred St. Louis' economic rise favored by policymakers. In the 1990s, Washington chipped away at the aforementioned protections for small banks that thrived in St. Louis against the interstate banking of large, national banks. St. Louis's economy quickly fell from competing with the likes of New York and Chicago to where many would argue it

still lies today: being nowhere near being a major economic player in the modern United States.

From 1984 to 2011, the number of independent banks in the United States was cut in half (Feldman). During that time, numerous corporations based in St. Louis were bought out by bigger, thriving businesses. The most memorable of these purchases for St. Louis residents involved Anheuser-Busch, which was purchased by the Belgian-based company, InBev, in 2008. The company was deeply ingrained in the St. Louis community as it was the most visible corporation that called St. Louis home. The connection was strengthened by the fact that the company owned the naming rights to the city's most popular sports franchise's stadium, that of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball organization. Through the beginning of the financial crisis in 2007 and the beginning of 2008, Anheuser-Busch served as a beacon of hope for St. Louis residents that the city could rebound and that a large corporation could not only survive, but thrive in St. Louis. But their buyout followed a long line of St. Louis companies that were folded into even larger corporations, including May Department Stores (bought by Federated Department Stores who owns Macy's among other chains) and McDonnell Douglas (bought by Boeing). There are still some notable companies headquartered in St. Louis including Express Scripts, Emerson Electric and Monsanto. But, gone are many of the businesses that helped power St. Louis's economy to its peak and thus the city has been hit hard. The City of St. Louis's population has decreased 63 percent since 1950 (Ihnen). Downtown St. Louis hasn't even had a shopping mall since the most recent one closed in 2006 due to a lack of shopping activity. Now, part of it is

being demolished and part of it is being converted to a parking garage as other visions for the building were never realized due to financial complications.

The history of businesses leaving St. Louis has much to do with the city's demographics today. The eastern part of St. Louis, considered the inner city, seems almost barren now. The 2010 U.S. Census again saw a decline in the population of St. Louis City. There was about an 8-percent decrease in the city's population between 2000 and 2008, and that trend isn't likely to be reversed as residents move further west away from St. Louis as a result of "white flight." The beginnings of St. Louis' modern day segregation problem were apparent in the 1940s when "white flight" from the inner city first began. People left the city to inhabit suburbs in every direction. In the 1970s St. Louis's current pattern of inhabitancy began to take shape as African Americans began to populate North St. Louis City and County which includes Ferguson (Engel). During this time period, much of the white population began to move west to suburbs like St. Charles. Today, African Americans mostly inhabit north St. Louis City and North St. Louis County while whites mostly occupy West St. Louis County, South County and St. Charles. In fact, today St. Charles has a larger population than St. Louis City which was unthinkable at one point in the city's history due to its thriving economy during the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a major factor in the St. Louis Rams football team leaving to play in Los Angeles a year ago. In a 29-page document consolidating the case for the Rams to leave St. Louis, the organization cited that, "the market lacks a robust regional area from which to draw individuals" and mentioned the fact that, "St. Louis had the lowest rate of population growth of any major U.S. city from 2008 to 2014" (Los Angeles Rams Franchise).

## Ferguson

St. Louis' long history of segregation and the city's recent economic downturn made it susceptible for what ensued in August 2014, when an unarmed 18-year-old, Michael Brown, was gunned down in North St. Louis County by Darren Wilson, a Ferguson police officer. Variation in witness testimonies have made the details of the incident a bit hazy. There are only two people who know what really happened on August 9, 2014, and one of them is dead. Officer Wilson claimed Brown reached for his weapon and was a threat to his life. DNA evidence failed to contradict his claim. Ultimately, a grand jury decided not to indict officer Wilson, due in part to witness testimony that was deemed implausible and untrustworthy because the accounts contradicted clear evidence from the autopsy and the crime scene (Levs). But whether or not officer Darren Wilson followed police protocol in shooting Mike Brown had little to do with what happened next. As Elizabeth Vega, an active protestor in the aftermath of Brown's death said in an interview, this was just, "the collective snap of the last straw" in a county where blacks made up 67 percent of the population but accounted for 6 percent of the entire police force.

In an investigation of the police department the Department of Justice found emails mocking African Americans through speech-related stereotypes, racist depictions of the Obamas, and much more (Perez). And according to community members, instances of police brutality against people of color were not isolated incidents, but semi-frequent. One story was recounted from 2014 when, "an African-American man was having an argument when officers responded and the man was

pulled out of his apartment. He responded 'you don't have a reason to lock me up' officer responded 'N-----, I can find something to lock you up on'. Man responded 'good luck with that'. Cop then slammed man's face into a wall and when he fell said 'don't pass out motherf-----, because I'm not carrying you to my car'" (Perez). *The Washington Post* notes that the disparity in demographics between the police department and Ferguson residents is a direct result of the governmental policies that were in place until the 70s that permitted redlining and racial zoning. What ensued was chaos.

In the aftermath of Brown's death, the "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and "Black Lives Matter" movements were born as a war cry of sorts to plead with police to stop shooting unarmed black men and women. Protestors saw these movements as simply asking for the right to live (Chang 95). It didn't take all that long after the shooting for Ferguson to resemble a Middle Eastern war zone rather than a quiet community with a charming downtown business district. Following the tragedy, the marginalized people of Ferguson and all of St. Louis took to the streets in what started as peaceful protesting. Then, just as much of the rest of the world has done in the face of consistent injustice, some of the crowds resorted to property damage and looting. With this, the police force morphed into what resembled a S.W.A.T. team with sniper rifles trained on groups of mostly well-intentioned civilians who were protesting peacefully. As a citizen of Ferguson until March 2016, I was petrified. And the most frightening part was this: I wasn't afraid of the protesters; I was afraid of the men and women who were sworn to serve and protect me. These same men and women were manning the tanks rolling down the streets and tossing tear gas to disperse protesters. My parents forbade me from driving down the streets near the area where Brown was gunned down, as those were the areas thought

to be most dangerous and full of police presence. Following Michael Brown's death and the subsequent protests throughout St. Louis, multiple investigations into Ferguson's policing habits were launched. The Arch City Defenders, a civil-rights law firm that seeks to protect the rights of the poor and people of color, released a white paper that came to some bleak conclusions regarding the justice system in Ferguson. First, they concluded that police activity in the county was strategic so that African Americans made up an overwhelmingly disproportionate amount of traffic stops and arrests relative to their population. The county was essentially being funded on the backs of the poor and black as "court fines and fees were the second largest source of city revenue" (Chang 96). The report called the situation in Ferguson "a modern debtors' prison scheme" as a simple speeding ticket for someone struggling financially could quickly snowball into more citations, fines, and arrests. This cruel cycle prevented many people from purchasing housing, securing a job, and even keeping custody of their own children—all from the inability to pay a speeding ticket. The U.S. Department of Justice conducted a similar investigation regarding the policing habits of the city of Ferguson and found similar patterns. It found the African Americans accounted for nearly all jaywalking and failure-to-comply charges. Additionally, it concluded that Ferguson's policing practices were based upon the need to produce revenue rather than ensure the safety of the public. The most jarring passage discussed the dehumanization of Ferguson's constituents:

Officers expect and demand compliance even when they lack legal authority. They are inclined to interpret the exercise of free-speech rights as unlawful threats, indications of mental or physical illness as belligerence. Police

supervisors and leadership do little to ensure that officers act in accordance with law and policy, and rarely respond meaningfully to civilian complaints of officer misconduct. The result is a pattern of stops without reasonable suspicion and arrests without probable cause in violation of the Fourth Amendment; infringement on free expression, as well as retaliation for protected expression, in violation of the First Amendment; and excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment (Department of Justice 2).

My family moved away from Ferguson in the past year to a new suburb. This migration was partially due to fear of the neighborhood deteriorating in the aftermath of the civil unrest and negative media coverage. Our new neighborhood is a far cry from Ferguson, as the payday loan stores and fast food joints I used to drive past have been replaced by lavish homes, outlet malls, and green golf courses. I still drive to the Ferguson area from time to time to catch up with friends and get my hair cut. Surveying the area gives me some pause as its appearance has noticeably declined in the aftermath of the incident. My family moving to a new part of St. Louis has equipped me with the ability to dissect segregation and inequality from personal experience. I've gone from living in an area that is mostly black to a community that is nearly bereft of blacks with double the median household income according to the 2010 United States Census. The path my life has taken has allowed me to see the grave effect that St. Louis's demographic trends can have on residents. My parents have had to call me on my drive home to ensure that I made it home safely amid rioting and civil unrest. I've been fearful of leaving my home for an entire day as local police were equipped with military grade equipment and weapons to disperse protesters. I've driven past stores

just a few miles east of my home that was defaced and destroyed in the aftermath of the grand jury's verdict in Officer Darren Wilson's trial.

The African-American citizens of St. Louis are not oblivious to their uphill battle. This is apparent in the statement Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, made to a St. Louis television reporter following her son's death: "You took my son away from me. You know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many! Because you bring them down to this type of level where they feel like, 'I don't got nothing to live for *anyway*'" (Chang 89).

### **Music to Organize and Share Opinions: Blues and Jazz**

Music is an excellent tool to organize the thoughts and opinions that Mcspadden felt the day that her son died. Hip hop music has addressed the hostile treatment of African Americans by police since its inception, and it is deeply rooted in the culture of jazz and blues. St. Louis was home to a vibrant blues scene to the extent that the hometown professional hockey team is named the St. Louis Blues. Many historians argue whether jazz gave birth to the blues or vice versa, but in St. Louis they grew up simultaneously. That said, the jazz style of St. Louis was heavily influenced by the blues, mostly due to the pioneering styles popularized by Miles Davis. Davis was unquestionably the most well-known jazz artist to hail from St. Louis. He was a pioneer in the genre responsible for popularizing several stylistic shifts. With his 1949 album, *Birth of the Cool*, he changed the course of jazz to "cool style" which had a more relaxed and lighter sound than the jazz that preceded it (Komara 82). Then in the 50s, his classic work, *Kind of Blue*, nudged jazz more towards the blues-influenced style that



defines St. Louis' jazz today and away from the hard bop-style (Komara 83). Though Davis stretched the boundaries of jazz, St. Louis never developed a unique regional style, due in large part to its geographical location. Longtime music expert on the St. Louis scene, Charlie Menees notes that "St. Louis, being the railroad and river transportation center that it was brought musicians here and carried musicians from here...they'd learn from our people here; our people learned from them" (Owsley 22). This created a mashup of styles that parallels St. Louis' hip hop today as it mixes Chicago's drill music and vibrant poetry scene, with trap beats from Atlanta. Much like its descendant, blues and jazz were scrutinized heavily because of their controversial themes and calls for social change. Blues instrumentation was accompanied by lyrics that were unapologetically defiant such as Son House's "Preachin' Blues" when he belts, "Yes I'ma get me religion / I'ma join the Baptist church / Yes I'ma get me religion / I say I'ma join the Baptist church / You know I want to be a Baptist preacher / So I won't have to work" (Young 133). Lyrics such as these criticizing the clergy are precisely what earned the blues the label "devil's music" among churchgoers both black and white. Some years later, hip hop would get the exact same label. Hip hop also mimics the blues versatility as "good-time music after all, meant to make you tap your feet and feel...comforted by the fact that you are in good (or deliciously bad) hands. The blues offer company, even if only misery's. (Young 134)" This description of blues music is eerily similar to that of hip hop in its rawest form. During the Vietnam War, there was a tug of war in St. Louis and throughout the country between jazz and blues traditionalists and experimentalists for control of the genre (Young 155). Younger black artists wanted to go their own direction with their music and poetry in what became known as the Black

Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka, considered the leader of the movement, wrote a poem that essentially beckoned for an art form with the characteristics of hip hop. In his poem “Black Art,” Baraka exclaims, “we want ‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys / And take their weapons leaving them dead.” In the final stanza Baraka declares, “We want a Black Poem.” Little did he know at the time, what he really wanted, was rap.

### **Hip Hop’s Evolution in St. Louis**

Much like the lively jazz and blues scene that preceded it, St. Louis’ hip hop scene has adapted to the changing environment and concerns of African Americans. In response to what’s simply become known as “Ferguson” to the national media, the tone of the area’s hip-hop music has gotten noticeably more serious over the past few years. In the 2000s, the music had a much more playful, cheerful tone to it. During this era, Nelly, a former resident of St. Louis County’s University City, was one of the biggest names in hip hop. Nelly and St. Louis had a love affair in which he showed his pride and appreciation for the city, frequently donning his Cardinals fitted ball cap in music videos and public appearances. The city of St. Louis reciprocated this appreciation by showing up in droves to purchase his first two albums. He released his debut album *Country Grammar* in 2000, and it eventually went diamond in 2016, selling 10 million copies. It’s officially the most recent hip-hop album do so and could conceivably be the last to do so with the popularity of streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music. He followed up his wildly successful debut with a second successful album titled *Nellyville*. Although Nelly would release more music, he would never come close to the

success of his first two albums again. In fact, in the 2010s, Nelly's name has become a punchline, especially to those outside of St. Louis. When involved in trivial arguments with friends from different cities, I cannot even count the number of times I've heard the rebuttal, "What's in St. Louis? Best thing you all ever had was Nelly," followed by a cackle as if Nelly didn't have one of the greatest runs for a hip hop artist ever. It seems that he's developed an identity as the face of and scapegoat for the hip hop of the early 2000s, which many music critics would argue was the low point in the genre's history. During this time, one of hip hop's most well-respected artists, Nas, went so far as to claim that the genre was dead. It was chock full of what many would describe as "bubble gum rap," rap that lacks lyrical substance and aims to appeal to everybody to gain airplay and create overnight celebrity. Not to say that Nelly's early work was "bubble gum rap," but I can't recall a Nelly song from his two most popular albums that provoked much thought about social injustice, dire living circumstances, or race relations in his hometown of St. Louis. That isn't to say that there's anything wrong with his music. Good hip hop music does not have to be all gloom—"stick it to the man" and "fight the power." It's no fluke that Nelly's stardom coincided with a more positive sociopolitical climate before St. Louis' demise was more publicly acknowledged. Nelly's music also serves as an interesting contrast point to St. Louis' modern hip hop environment.

St. Louis doesn't currently have an artist anywhere near the stratosphere Nelly inhabited at his peak, but the young rapper Smino has been acknowledged as an artist with star potential. The contrasting musical styles between he and Nelly perfectly exemplifies how hip hop music is influenced by the political climate of its creation period

before it eventually enacts its influence on the culture. Smino, who was born in St. Louis, is in his early twenties and just recently released his debut album *blkswan* in March 2017. On one of the album's more well-received tracks, "Father Son Holy Smoke" he raps, "We just want my people thriving, yeah / Kill the cops and starve the culture vultures / I'm learning to teach my kids about agriculture / F.D.A. approving murder burgers / The bullets ain't the only thing that hurt us." One would be hard pressed to find any lyrics so insightful in Nelly's *Country Grammar* or *Nellyville*. That said, it's important to look at both the political and economic climates in which Nelly's most memorable work and Smino's debut album were released. During the year 2000, when Nelly exploded onto the national stage, life was good in the United States by most standards. It predated the great recession of the mid to late-2000s and the Dow Jones Industrial average had reached an all-time high at the beginning of the year in large part due to the internet boom. It also didn't hurt that camera phones hadn't yet been popularized to record the murder of black men at the hands of police and bring such occurrences to the forefront of public consciousness. Now, fast-forward to 2017, when, by most accounts, St. Louis is no longer even considered a major U.S. city, residents lack the wherewithal to even sustain one downtown shopping center, and many neighborhoods have been decimated by a consistently declining population.

From St. Louis's current social and economic circumstances sprang a new generation of artists that sounded nothing like the most popular music of the 2000s. It has become apparent that in the right hands "hip hop could...catalyze consciousness in a new generation" (Chang 123). Even St. Louis artists who would be considered artists in the mold of Chief Keef moreso than "conscious" poets in the form of Talib Kweli seem

to be more aware of their city's long history of issues with race and subsequent oppression. Rappers in the mold of Chief Keef are known as "drill" rappers. Drill rap is a style of rap known for being especially grim and violent rather than socially aware. For example, 3 Problems was one of the more popular rap groups in the St. Louis area among teens during their rise in the early-to-mid 2010s. They began making music in the 2000s as a "teeny bopper" group with catchy, sing-songy hooks incorporated with dance moves. The group has since been reduced to just one talented artist, Taylor Merriweather, whose stage name is Lil Tay, after one group member was sentenced to prison and the other was shot to death just days before the release of the duo's new mixtape in December 2015. The group typically raps about similar things to other drill rappers: making money by any means, selling drugs, and surviving the harsh realities of rough neighborhoods. At the beginning one of their most popular songs to date "Come Around", Merriweather raps, "They say / The worst feeling being broke / I say man I know / Where I'm from we got no hope / So we rob folks / They say fuck our applications so we slingin' dope / 'Cause you ain't got to fill an app just to cop a 'O'." In just a few lines, Merriweather bluntly describes the desperation a young African-American male may feel in a system designed for them to fail and end up imprisoned. He also plainly states that due to repeated experiences of prejudice and racism against people from his hometown of Ferguson, people don't even bother filling out job applications and resort to selling drugs instead, which just perpetuates the cycle of imprisonment of black men in St. Louis. He forces the listener to wonder what other options are available to them.

## **Hip Hop's Sociopolitical Significance**

In his music, Merriweather tells stories of what happens when young black men see little chance of making it out of their difficult situations. As a whole, hip hop artists are storytellers more so than artists of other genres. The writers tell stories of triumph, defeat, and depression that are based in reality more often than not. Hip hop's origins in blues and jazz and the sociopolitical climate in which it came to fruition contributed to making it inherently the rawest of all musical genres. Jazz and blues instrumentation is still deeply ingrained in hip hop as many of today's artists sample their parents' records as backbeats. These artists don't pull any punches, nor are they expected to. Nothing is sugar-coated in rap, which scares some potential listeners away. When it was founded, fans of other black genres like soul and funk often disapproved, claiming that it wasn't real music, just as the blues was once labeled "devil's music." Due to some of the lyrical content in several early artists' music, such as the explicit messages of N.W.A., young fans of hip hop often had to sneak records into their bedrooms against the wishes of their parents. Basically, hip hop was born out of rebellion and brutal honesty and 40 years later, it still rings true. The genre also made the creation of music more accessible to the poor since it doesn't require actual live, expensive instruments. Many point to hip hop music as degrading because of the curse words and foul language it often uses. But harsh words are necessary to describe a harsh reality. If people finds themselves offended by the profane lyrics of an artist, then they very well should be offended by the profane circumstances of oppression the artist is referring to. They should also note that the profanity in the music is what garnered their attention in the first place and further emphasizes the artist's message. Artists are generally

influenced and inspired to create by their environment. If someone lives in an environment filled with drugs, hopelessness, and violence, should they not be allowed to make art reflecting their environment? Rappers are storytellers just like other artists and may use hyperbole to get their point across more clearly. Sometimes they take on a character that isn't their own so that someone with a lesser voice can be heard, which can be a powerful tool if used properly. Some artists get a bad reputation for painting pictures of violence or hardship that they've never experienced in their own personal life. This is unfair. You rarely hear the same criticisms directed towards actors in movies or television shows for this offense. Hip hop's lack of pacification enables rappers to tell stories and give perspectives that are as bleak and hopeless as life itself can seem at times. For this reason, hip hop music can cover an extremely wide range of emotions and circumstances. Some tell the archetypal rags-to-riches story, some tell cautionary tales of getting caught up in the gang lifestyle, and others preach the importance of education. There's something for everyone in hip hop, which makes it such a special art form.

I had the pleasure of speaking to St. Louis rap artist and social activist Antoine White, whose stage name is T-Dubb-O, about what role he thought hip hop music could potentially play to resolve some of the race-related issues that St. Louis is facing. White believes that “[hip hop] is the most influential voice that we [African-Americans] have,” though he thinks it has lost some of its luster due to the commercialization of rap. The commercialization of rap has come with a mixed bag of consequences. First, the positives: “rap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless” (Rose 101), and, right now, there is no bigger stage in music than hip hop, as a 2015 study

conducted by Spotify concluded that hip hop is the world's most popular genre of music. So, one could say that African Americans have a more influential tool at their disposal to make their voices heard than ever before. But commercialization can interfere with artistry. Rapper Chuck D said rap was CNN for black people. White thinks that rap, "used to be the report of the ghetto [...] before CNN or the news station would tell you what's going on in the hood", but, now, due to the commercialization of the genre, "it's the same nonsense ... and the real [honest] artists that are out there, some of them are propelled into the star light and most of them aren't." So, there are two sides to the monetization and increasing popularity of rap. On one end, more people than ever are taking hip hop music seriously and not dismissing it as overtly violent or inappropriate. It has become a legitimate area of academic study and even has classes dedicated to it at prestigious universities like Harvard. On the other hand, it has opened the floodgates for artists who lack the passion and creativity to convey a clear, concise message in their music. Critics of hip hop's "new wave" argue that the genre has become too diluted by talentless, money-obsessed artists who have no intention of spreading important or positive messages through their music. This shouldn't be misconstrued to conclude that *all* rap needs to be depressing and socially conscious; there still is and always will be a time and place for straightforward music that's simply catchy and sonically pleasing. Hip hop itself has origins as dance and party music by way of DJ Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash in the Bronx during the 1970s. However, oppressed peoples have a long history of using art to mock leaders in power, express rage, and envision fantasies of a better life for themselves (Rose 99). In that regard, hip hop music is not all that far removed from the negro spirituals, slave dances, blues, or jazz



music that preceded it. These art forms create an inversion of roles as the oppressed gets the chance to tell history from their perspective. It is well known that the victor typically writes history, and rap flips that notion on its head as it provides a voice to the marginalized.

### **Hip Hop's Role in a Divided Society**

Hip hop music is so flush with social and political messages that it could do a great deal to heal the racial division that has plagued St. Louis and other major cities for far too long. In my interview, White opined that, "There's no way someone like (St. Louis) Mayor Slay can know what poor people, or poor black people need because he's never been a poor black person...plus he's been acclimated all of his life to be a champion for a system that's causing this oppression," and he's right. White is very much in touch with the black community in St. Louis. For this reason, he partnered with other passionate St. Louis residents to found Hands Up United: an organization which, according to White, "is centered around the liberation of black and poor people" through political education, open dialogues and general education development. White isn't the only hip hop artist who's deeply entrenched in his community. The organization was also co-founded by local artist and activist Tef Poe. Through their community involvement, rappers like T-Dubb-O and Tef Poe see the oppression and hopelessness that plagues African Americans up close and personal. This personal experience then informs their music, which makes it so important. Unless community leaders and policymakers are going to sit down face-to-face with the most marginalized members of the St. Louis community and hear the raw anger and desperation in their voices, they

should instead listen to the artists who relay those same harsh realities over chilling beats. Artists like White carry a heavy burden. They don't only speak for themselves or for black people. They represent the misgivings of the helpless and exploited. Something as simple as being aware of what the oppressed face on a day-to-day basis and actively doing something about it would go a long way in preventing the next Ferguson, which is in everybody's best interest.

This is not to suggest that community leadership simply listening to rap music will solve every single problem regarding race in major cities like St. Louis. Hip hop and art in general can serve as a starting point for empathizing with the marginalized. Nor does it suggest that hip hop artists have any sort of obligation to voice their political and social dissatisfaction. Part of what makes hip hop so spell-binding is its diversity. But the state of hip hop music can be a great barometer for the sentiments of the black community at large. For instance, many hip hop fans in St. Louis have argued that local artist Tef Poe predicted the chaos in Ferguson long before Brown's death. His music preceding the event in August 2014 had been harping on the mistreatment of African Americans in the St. Louis and North County, which is where Ferguson is located. As an artist, he took the "pulse" of his community and had the ability to sense that the black community in St. Louis had reached a breaking point. His music gave listeners the sense that the next straw would be the last, and that was exactly the case. In his most popular song to date "War Cry," Tef Poe lashes out at Missouri governor Jay Nixon when he raps: "Ferguson is Barack Obama's Katrina / Hip hop is the culture, compel my brain but Iggy and Mac Miller never felt my pain / Snakes on a plane, but I got God in the cockpit / Harry Belafonte don't worry I got this." He concludes the song barking

“With every breath in my body, it’s fuck Jay Nixon.” Throughout “War Cry,” the listener gets the sense that Tef Poe realizes that his lyrics are more important than hip hop music itself. He namedrops Harry Belafonte and vows to continue the fight for civil rights he participated in, which is a daunting task considering Belafonte was an associate of Martin Luther King Jr (Mckinley). He doesn’t care that Barack Obama is the first black president, nor does he seem to mull over the potential repercussions of hurling threats towards Missouri’s governor because he is so enraged and passionate. He even manages to touch on cultural appropriation and the fact that his art differs from that of white artists like Mac Miller and Iggy Azalea due to the hardships of the black American experience. Not only is rap the art of choice for social activism and revolution, but it offers a look into the thought processes of the oppressed, in turn providing a warning when marginalized people are fed up. For example, Smino has a very poignant message that deserves attention on the song “Oxygen” from his mixtape “blkjuptr”:

My tank on E, I need a pick me up  
Can I uber to jupiter witcha?  
This world been so brutal for niggas  
Hands up they still shot go google the pictures  
So ooh, it's ridiculous  
I got blood on my knees  
Knee deep in mud from the mud let me breathe  
He just a thug let 'em die in the streets  
Cigarette butts, glass, and rocks in my teeth  
And I'm choking out, I need oxygen please

Dreading the day like I locked up my bro  
Remember the day that they locked up my bro  
Ain't been the same, feel the shit to this day  
And I'm choking out  
I need oxygen.

This chorus is loaded with innuendo directed at police while also discreetly referencing victims of police brutality. Smino starts by expressing how exhausted he is from fighting oppression and racism. His exasperation has reached the point that he doesn't even have the will to stay and fight anymore. He'd rather inhabit a different planet. The "mud" that he's stuck in that's preventing him from breathing represents the hard times in life that don't allow him to exhale and relax as well as literal mud that he's being subdued in by an officer. The phrase "just a thug" is intentionally used in this chorus to exemplify the dehumanization of black bodies. The description of what's in his teeth is meant to inform listeners that he's been tackled to the ground, which is not clean or well-kept. The repeated reference to needing oxygen is a likely nod to Eric Garner, who died from a chokehold by an NYPD officer. As Garner was restrained, he repeatedly gasped, "I can't breathe," similar to Smino's, "I need oxygen please." Furthermore, he references the incarceration of one of his friends and the fact that it affects his mental state on a daily basis, pointing to the effect that the mass incarceration of black men can have on a family and friends. The mass incarceration of black men destroys families, leaving children fatherless and peers without their confidants who help them get through the toughest days.

The issue of hip hop's social significance is especially dear to me because I am a lifetime fan of the genre. Hip hop is especially important to me as I've witnessed racial divides wreak havoc in my own neighborhood, and I've watched a good number of my non-black neighbors relocate in my 20 years living in Ferguson. Hip hop is the only genre of music that acknowledges such issues in an uncensored manner. Simply hearing the bitter hopelessness in an artist's voice should do something within a listener to open a path for empathy and make them want to do something to help. And in a struggling city like St. Louis, lending a hand to end the systemic oppression against African Americans would go a long way in saving the entire city itself. Paying attention to the hip hop community's concerns could prevent the next Ferguson that would cripple St. Louis permanently. Plus, a large portion of St. Louis' hip hop community consists of reputable characters that want change and healing in their communities. Just look at T-Dubb-O's activity protesting in the streets of Ferguson and his organization Hands Up United. In Dubb's song, "Fux Shit Up," fellow St. Louis rapper Bo Dean raps, "Whoever's on the throne tell 'em get up/and acknowledge a young nigga/Or we gon' fuck shit up/The city need leaders and they picked us". The entire song's purpose is to demand the attention of the leadership in St. Louis. That is, the very same leadership that has long maintained an environment where the aftermath of Ferguson's events was not only necessary, but inevitable. That leadership better pay close attention to What Dean and Dubb have to say next, before the threats in their lyrics turn to palpable action.

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