

## Episode 24: On Ferguson

Run Time: 50:33

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BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer, host)  
KS: Karriann Soto (producer, host)  
TB: Tessa Brown (special guest)  
SW: Sheri Williams (special guest)  
YR: Yanira Rodriguez (host)  
NS: Nikeeta Slade (special guest)

*Cue Music: "Strange Arithmetic" by The Coup*

AH: You're listening to *This Rhetorical Life*—a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

*"Strange Arithmetic"*

*History has taught me some strange arithmetic  
Using swords" prison bars" and pistol grips  
English is the art of bombing towns  
While assuring that you really only blessed the ground  
Science is that honorable" useful study  
Where you contort the molecules and then you make that money*

BK: Ben Kuebrich here, and I've been listening to The Coup, this great punk/hip-hop band from Oakland. We're just going to let this play for a second.

*"Strange Arithmetic"*

*Teacher  
My hands up  
Please, don't make me a victim  
Teachers  
Stand up  
You need to tell us how to flip this system (repeats once)*

BK: Today we're talking about the protests that have been sustained over several months in Ferguson, Missouri after the brutal killing of Mike Brown—and within that topic the use of media, citizen journalism, the representations and uses of anger, and the representations of people of color over traditional and social media, as well as the national conversation sparked by this and related events.

But I want to get into this song and start with this song because I was struck the other day by the chorus: "Teacher, my hands up, please don't make me a victim." An authority figure, a police officer, or a teacher turning someone with their hands up—a universally peaceful signal into a victim. Someone who's calling for peace. Someone who's looking to speak. And the next part of the chorus: "Teacher's, stand up, you need to tell us how to

flip this system.” It is a call for responsibility for teachers—for us in education to teach students how to replace an unjust society with a just one.

This is a podcast about the practice, pedagogy, and the public circulation of rhetoric in our lives. And in talking about Ferguson today, I want to be thinking about the connection of all three—not just about the way rhetoric is circulating around Ferguson but how our own public texts are circulating, either to create and sustain or to challenge and resist the sort of system that creates Darren Wilsons. And I want to be thinking about the practice of rhetoric in our daily lives, the way that we speak to one another and *who* we speak to, but I also don’t want to forget about our role as teachers in the classroom and with students. That is, having students not just analyze important issues like what is happening in Ferguson but to teach them and help with them flip what is unjust, and that is the responsibility of all of us in every situation to build a society in which Darren Wilson does not brutally kill Mike Brown in a residential street.

Today we have a lot of help—getting into media analysis, naming important contexts and histories, and reporting from two citizen journalists in their own right. Today we bring Tessa Brown, Sherri Williams, and Nikeeta Slade. We’re going to start here with Karriann bringing us into the first segment of the show.

KS: As rhetoric and composition scholars, being attuned to the circulation of texts and ideas allows us to consider the concealment of state violence against citizens even in our own country. This was highlighted by the events that occurred around Ferguson immediately following Michael Brown’s death. It also brings up questions about media representations and the kind of coverage that these events received. One of our fellow Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Ph.D. students here at Syracuse wrote about such topics in a series of articles published in *The American Reader*.

Hello everyone. This is Karriann Soto sharing with you an interview I did with 2nd-year doctoral student Tessa Brown whose research interests include the intersections of popular culture, race, and hip hop. In “Dead or in Jail: Ferguson and the Bounty on Black Life,” Tessa Brown writes...

TB: “What we see, in fact, is the buoying of our economy, and the enrichment of the 1%, at the expense of human lives, lives like Michael Brown’s. This is the family portrait of late-stage American capitalism: our weapons, deployed all over the world, have no targets left but ourselves.

KS: She notes then, the economic contexts through which we can understand the events in Ferguson, especially in relation to violence against people of color. So I asked her to expand upon the economic perspective she developed in writing the piece.

TB: One of the things that struck me immediately about the events surrounding the murder of Michael Brown and one of the things that really struck the country was the militarization of the police force in Ferguson, which is just a small, close suburb of St. Louis. Unfortunately I think police brutality was *not* the surprising part of the story.

Unfortunately as a country we're pretty used to that—police violence against people of color and young black men especially, but what was really surprising was the tanks and the armored vehicles and the machine guns and the SWAT gear that the police showed up in to battle just young people that were in the street that were not being violent. So part of the story that really interested me from the beginning was just the money trail: How did these vehicles end up in Ferguson—just a random suburb in America? Who was paying for it? Who's benefiting off of that? Which to me obviously is the defense industry and just thinking about as America has pulled out of foreign engagements, there have been economic interests like the defense industry that are negatively impacted on that and so thinking about how those industries have pushed Congress to create new markets for their products—namely, our own cities.

Then in that first piece I also was thinking about the economics of the American inner city. Ferguson is not even an inner city. It's a suburb. But the economics of communities of color. My interest in that was supported by an op-ed written in *The St. Louis American*, which is an African American newspaper, that just talked about the effects of deindustrialization on this community, on Michael Brown's community, on his high school, on the possibilities for social mobility in that community. And in Ferguson, I really saw two economic stories colliding: one was the story of deindustrialization, which is also the economic story of hip-hop, which is what I study. And the other one was the economic story of our foreign policy—our defense industry—and how economics have almost gotten in the way of our efforts to make less war, [laughs] so the war has just come home because of the economics of the situation.

KS: There is a connection between transnational contexts and the local U.S. context specifically in her second article, "Gaza, Ferguson, and the Perils of White Guilt," where Tessa juxtaposes Gaza and Ferguson, starting with the story of Hedy Epstein, a Holocaust survivor who was protesting in Ferguson while wearing a t-shirt that read "Stay human." I therefore asked Tessa about the connections between her identity as a Jewish woman and a hip-hop scholar, and how these affect her reading of Ferguson.

TB: I think my work on hip-hop, it really demands, and has cultivated in me a sense of empathy for people whose upbringing was different than mine—I grew up in a pretty privileged white community in Chicago, but engaging with hip-hop and committing myself to social justice teaching is an empathetic project. I'm Jewish also, and that's always been very important to me, and not just for me but for a lot of young Jews there's a crisis right now—a moral crisis—over Israel, which is an occupying power. It has settlements in the West Bank. It controls the borders and the livelihoods of the people that live in Gaza, and for a lot of young Jews that's not commensurate with the Judaism that we want to practice and that we grew up devoted to. And in my work as a hip-hop scholar, my focus is always on the oppressed and their forms of resistance and their efforts to reclaim their dignity and their humanity, so it's hard for me to keep those two parts of my politics separate from each other. That has definitely informed my thinking on Israel, and there's a huge hip-hop scene in Israel because hip-hop is part of global, political resistance in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

So in the second piece I just really thought about how these two moments were connected, and they weren't discrete even on the world stage and on the media stage. There was this surreal moment when the police in Ferguson started using tear gas on the protesters there, and people in Gaza who were currently suffering under Israel's Operation Protective Edge this summer in August started tweeting at people in Ferguson about how best to avoid or handle the symptoms of tear gas.

And I keep thinking, even as we're talking of some of the speeches that Martin Luther King gave late in his career against the Vietnam War and his increasing conviction that America's racist domestic policy and racist foreign policy were very deeply connected. And for many people, that's thought of as the radical position that, sort of, the government couldn't really tolerate from him anymore.

KS: All throughout her series of articles, there is a constant presence and conscious citation of social media texts that influence how she understands the events around Ferguson and around Gaza. Because of the role that social media plays in her own understandings of the events, I specifically asked about what she thinks of social media's role in the distribution and representations of these events.

TB: Well social media was really central to my understanding of this event from the beginning just because that's how I heard of it. I found it on Twitter and just started following the story and started following it as it picked up speed on Twitter. Within a few days of Michael Brown's murder, it seemed like my whole Twitter feed was talking about it, and yet there was no...there wasn't a lot of mainstream media coverage at the beginning. And it also seemed really limited to Twitter, and there were some articles that I read later about how Ferguson really gestures towards the importance of net neutrality because on sites like Facebook where algorithms filter out the so-called relevance or irrelevance of certain posts, Ferguson was not arising in people's Facebook feeds. Whereas on Twitter where there was no sorting algorithm, the story was able to gain traction because it was just there. If you were online while someone was tweeting about it, you would see it no matter how many people had liked it or shared it or whatever else. So social media was really important in terms of getting the story out and in terms of my seeing it. It was important in terms of my writing these stories because my editor at *The American Reader* saw my tweeting about it and asked me to write these pieces.

I was in California this summer. I never went to Ferguson. I wonder now, are these just "think pieces," or was I reporting on something? And I think if I was reporting on anything, I was reporting on the media. Part of what I was doing was covering the media and interrogating media representations, the images of Ferguson, the way that people tweeted about Ferguson. Just in the excerpt I read before about the economics and this question of whether people of color have always been exploited for economic gain in America—that was a commentary that I saw in a lot of tweets that I linked to in my piece. Activists and writers like Mikki Kendall out of Chicago pointing out that this is not new—the economics of Ferguson are not new for America—and kind of rejecting this script that would come up of horror at how could this happen in America? And there were people on social media pushing back and saying, "No, no, no. This is always what

happens in America. Don't feign surprise. This is the economy that we live in."

KS: Similar to the writers and activists that Tessa refers to in her pieces, it's safe to say that in addition to being a critical media consumer, in writing these pieces Brown has also become a producer of media that aims to trouble our understandings of recent events. So I asked how she would connect that to the work that we do in our scholarship on rhetoric and composition more explicitly.

*Cue Music: "Note Drop" by Broke For Free*

TB: We're just kind of ending on a discursive note. I'm just noticing how familiar some of these scripts are that are still being circulated in our media. My last piece kind of ended with, "Can't we find more creative ways to report these stories?" The story of Michael Brown is so important, but we get trapped, I think, in this narrow narrative that we've been telling for a really long time. There's so many other pieces to the puzzle that need exploring. So I sort of ended my work, and I feel this way still, with a lot more questions than answers and just this feeling that there's so much more excavation that needs to be done, and I think hopefully that's part of what we can do in our scholarship and our rhetoric study.

BK: This is Ben Kuebrich again, introducing a discussion I had with Sherri Williams. Sherri's a doctoral student in Mass Communication at the Newhouse School at Syracuse University. She's written for *The Source*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* magazines, appeared as a commentator on CNN, and worked for the Associated Press. Among other topics, she studies representations of people of color in the media. I talk with Sherri about her engagement with the news coming out of Ferguson, especially through the citizen journalism happening over social media. I also talk to her about her experiences on the ground in Ferguson as she traveled with a group from Syracuse, New York as part of the Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride.

*Cue Music: "EMO Step Show" by The Custodian of Records*

BK: I want to talk to you about Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager on his way to college in a few weeks who was shot and killed by officer Darren Wilson on August 9th. It had me thinking in preparing for the interview today about how I was home in rural Illinois mid-August with my white, middle-class family, and they were all talking about Ferguson—talking about how militarized the police were, how terrible it was that another unarmed Black youth was shot. I thought that was really interesting that they initiated this. My grandpa who actually lives outside of St. Louis and was home for a moment was talking about it. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you saw this story spread from August 9th to then a week later or something most of the country knowing about Ferguson and about what happened—and maybe also talking about how it was that you first saw that story, where you first saw that story.

SW: I first saw the story, believe it or not, on Instagram because there's a local reporter—a television reporter—in St. Louis, Brittany Noble (Noble-Jones) who...I know her, but I

don't know her. We're both members of the National Association of Black Journalists. A lot of us just follow each other, and we follow the work that one another does. I follow her on Instagram, and I just started to see all these video posts and also photo posts of people gathering, congregating a lot together, people protesting at the apartment complex where he was killed at first. I saw some clips of his mother crying just this gut-wrenching soul cry and just a lot of anger coming from the neighborhood and the apartment complex. I was already getting to be familiar with the story before it started to blow up in mainstream media.

Also, we have a listserv, and on our listserv, people were saying, "Hey, you know this young guy was killed by police in St. Louis. One of our colleagues is covering the story, and here are the links to her social media accounts, and you guys should check them out." But I had already seen them anyway. So he was killed on a Saturday, and I think the first time I saw it on the news was maybe Sunday night, but there really wasn't much to it. So we know when news comes on, the most important stories are the stories that are right at the top of the hour—right at 7, right at 11, whatever the hour is. So when I did finally see the story, I think it was Saturday night on ABC News that comes on at 6:30, I didn't really see that story until maybe 6:37-6:40, something like that. So it wasn't really high on the news agenda, but I didn't start to see the story really spread in national media [until] probably like seven to ten days later, and I think that is because the protests *continued*. It wasn't just—the protests weren't just something that happened for one or two days. They were *consistent*. They were *long*. They were *strong*. The people on the ground were really strong in their convictions to fight for justice for this young man who was killed by the police, but then you saw the police become long and strong with their aggression *against* the citizens, right? So you have citizens walking down the streets with their hands up, and there's this one iconic photo that I'll never forget. There's a young black man who's standing up in the middle of the street with his hands up, and there are like a *dozen* police officers in riot gear with their guns pointing at him. And I think those kinds of images were the kinds of images that really got the entire country to kind of stand up and start to listen more. Because at the same time, we were seeing pictures of what was going on in Gaza, in the Middle East, in other areas in the world. But then right here in the heartland in the United States, we're seeing what pretty much looks like a war zone, and I think that is what clicked for people—when the whole conversation of the militarization of the police really started to bubble up and get on the national agenda.

- BK: That iconic picture—I don't know if that was taken by a citizen journalist or someone from the mainstream media, but we do know that there's tons and tons of citizen journalism happening, sharing images, sharing videos, sharing up-to-date messages. And I wanted to know why is that citizen journalism important in contrast to what the traditional media might provide?
- SW: I feel like citizen journalists don't have to wait for some editors and some producers to decide what is important and what people should know. They're able to bypass the gatekeepers and just pick up mobile technology and log on to those social media accounts and just tell the audience directly what they think is important, so they don't have to deal with the gatekeepers. They don't have to deal with the agenda setters. They can do it on

their own, and I think that's particularly important. Social media and mobile technology has particularly been important for people of color, for working class people, for immigrants, for LGBT people, people who belong to groups who have been traditionally marginalized in the media because they don't have to not only wait for the media to tell their stories but they also don't have to wait to have their stories be misconstrued, too, and have their stories misinterpreted. Because we know that a lot of these groups, too, they're not covered in the media a lot, and then when they are they're heaped with a lot of stereotypes. They're piled with a lot of stereotypes, and the complete story isn't always told. That's why I think social media is really, really important in this case because you're hearing directly from the community, directly from the people who are affected by these issues, without having to wait for CNN, NBC, ABC, or any other mainstream news organization to show up. And also, when those news organizations have shown up—because we've seen the authorities in Ferguson be very heavy-handed with everything that they're doing. So we saw that there were journalists from *The Washington Post* and *The Huffington Post* arrested. So when the mainstream media is being crushed by authorities, you have thousands [or] hundreds of citizens who...they can't silence all of those voices. They've been rising up to the top and informing people about what's going on all over the country.

BK: I've seen on social media not just on the ground reporting but also responding to mainstream media. There was the campaign essentially about what would it look like if I was killed.

SW: #iftheygunnedmedown

BK: Right.

SW: Yeah, so there are a lot of things. That's one of them, #iftheygunnedmedown (<http://iftheygunnedmedown.tumblr.com>). So when Mike Brown was first killed, and the media started to show pictures of him, there was one picture that they showed where he had on a basketball jersey, and he appeared to be you know just throwing up the peace sign—like deuces, two fingers. There were people in the media audience who interpreted that as he was throwing up a gang sign, so then people on social media were challenging that. Why is it that when a young black man holds up two fingers it's seen as a gang sign, but when someone else does it it's seen as a peace sign? That's been the universal hand signal for peace for decades, so why is it when it comes to him we don't see it that way? There was also the question: why was this casual photo of him in a jersey throwing up what you and your news room could even maybe interpret as a gang sign and not a picture of him in his cap and gown? So there were questions of respectability—respectability politics came into play, too, so that's where that #iftheygunnedmedown hashtag came up. Even though I am a youngish black woman pursuing a Ph.D. [who] has a career as a journalist, would you show a picture of me with a drink in my hand kicking it with my friends, or would you show a more respectable picture of me maybe teaching in a classroom? So people on social media were challenging these stereotypical normative ideas of black criminality. What I've seen, especially people from Ferguson, contest a lot is really just the *facts*—the facts of what's going on there. You'll see on

CNN or some of the mainstream news there were *riots* and that the riots were *violent*, but then in the same breath you'd see people on the ground saying that this actually wasn't a riot. This was a peaceful protest. Police started tear-gassing people and aggressively interacting with people, and then people defended themselves.

So I think social media has been important because it's given people an opportunity to refute not only stereotypes that have appeared in the media about this case but also refute some of the facts that have happened on the ground in terms of clashes between protesters and the authorities.

BK: I'm curious if you could share about what's happening there on the ground, face to face with organizations and how that is pushing for...you know, we know that real social change and structural change is going to have to happen from that, not just from people tweeting but also from that work. What are you seeing on the ground there, and how is it that maybe connected with what is happening online?

SW: For one thing, I think what the whole social media space has done is that it has connected people. So there have been people in California, people in Texas, people here in upstate New York and in the state in general and in the city who have really gotten a chance to not only *learn* about the issues that are going on there but also to start to be connected with some of the activists on the ground.

But then also to strategize. So some of that strategy I've seen happen online, but then it has translated on the ground. The whole Black Lives Matter freedom ride...the whole intention of it was to have people from all over the country come and not only just demonstrate with their bodies that not only does Mike Brown's life matter but other black lives matter, too. It wasn't just a weekend of just protesting period. There was pretty much a special call for people with skills to come—people with media skills to actually document people's stories and write down and somehow capture through photo, video, through text what are people experiencing here? What has been going on here?

So that was...the Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride was, in my opinion, it was started—I don't want to say it started out as—but a lot of people learned about it through social media. But it translated into real life and on-the-ground activism. So what Black Lives Matter is continuing to do is to do demonstrations, town hall meetings, even educational forums across the country. I think a lot of people's entry point to the whole Mike Brown case might have been through social media, but those who have been really, really touched by this have then translated that online social media knowledge into real-life, on-the-street activism.

BK: Yeah and not only in Missouri but also in, as you were saying New York City...

SW: Yeah, across the country.

BK: Right, and I wonder if you want to talk a little more about that. What is there to do locally? Because we know that this isn't just about Ferguson and Missouri.

SW: Absolutely.

BK: Where do we go from here as a country—it seems like we’re having a national conversation around this finally, but where do we go from here, and how do we make sure it doesn’t just die out like any other media story?

SW: Well locally, I think there’s a lot that people can do, right? So we know that here in Syracuse there have been a couple of instances of police brutality just over the summer. The city is not having a series of conversations with people. What I saw was here in Syracuse right after this happened—and not just in Syracuse. A lot of municipalities were starting to wonder, *could that happen here? And what are we doing here to prevent something like this from happening?* How effective they will be, I’m not sure, but I know that one of the ways that people can let the authorities know how they’re feeling about issues of police brutality and anti-black violence is to attend these meetings and to start doing things on their own. I went to a rally back in August that was started by two 10th graders who, you know I just saw them say in Facebook, “We’re sick of this.” Two 16-year-old girls said, “We’re having a youth rally downtown at the Federal building because we’re sick of this kind of stuff happening,” and there were a sizable amount of people who came, who showed up.

So sometimes people think that rallies and protests don’t really make a difference, but I think we’ve seen through history that they have, and that might be an entry point for someone to kind of maybe start to get more information and start to become more active. But it can translate into something else.

YR: I’m speaking to Nikeeta Slade, a socialist, activist, and writer living in Syracuse, New York. She is an organizer with the Howie-Hawkins and Brian Jones’s Green Party Campaign. Nikeeta travelled to Ferguson, Missouri in early September as part of the Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride. We talk about Ferguson beyond the moment, the role of anger in sustaining a movement, and where she thinks the movement is headed. Our conversations begin when Nikeeta first hears about the tragic death of Mike Brown and the events that followed.

NS: I found out about the killing of Mike Brown and what was happening in Ferguson on social media I saw a whole bunch of people posting. Again another young black person shot down in the streets. So I remember I kept following the news. I was just so disgusted by it because Mike Brown happened and then there had been Ezell Ford and then John Crawford. There was just a number of things that has happened earlier in the summer.

YR: What is the difference between reading about the events and actually being on the grounds with people?

NS: I really didn’t know what to expect. We were walking down preparing for the march and so we were walking down West Florissant and then we saw boarded up signs, boarded up buildings. Some of them were saying, “Thank you, Ferguson appreciates your support,”

and those kinds of things. It's a big main street. But we started marching into this neighborhood and I said, "Why on earth are we marching in a neighborhood?" I was like, "This is a big street there is more visibility." And then we were marching in the neighborhood and the street kept getting more narrow. There were homes, apartments, and I was like, "Why are we here? This doesn't make sense." There were about 500-600 people marching down this small narrow residential street. And then we got to the edge of the street and there were some faith leaders. They spoke, and they were like "Get out of the middle of the street; get on the sidewalk," because Mike Brown's family was there, his mom and the rest of his family. And they were like "Let the family have the street." And once everyone moved to the side of the street, I realized we were in the actual place where Mike Brown was murdered. And the image that has stayed with me since the protest is he was killed in his community. It was such a small, narrow street and there were apartments that were right off the edge of the street. The fact that Darren Wilson felt comfortable shooting shots in such a narrow space shows that he had absolutely no regard for anybody in that community. And I feel like I'm tearing up just thinking about that. It reminds us why the clarion call, the chant of the whole, what has come out of Ferguson is "black lives matter." It was with such reckless abandon the way Darren Wilson was shooting, the way he shot Mike Brown, the way he shot in such a small community. Those are the things that society that reminds us there is not kind of humanity, black life is so devalued in this country. Not only would he do that but he face no legal repercussions because of that.

YR: You mentioned so many names.

NS: Right.

YR: This is not the first incident. What is different about this moment that is creating a movement, very different from what we have seen in terms of other cases?

NS: Again because it has happened with such frequency I think that the anger has propelled people to realize this isn't going away. And I think because it happened back to back in the summer, what was it last summer with Trayvon Martin, I think people are realizing it is not just the fact that we are killed mercilessly but particularly when you talk about Black people and Black communities are targeted by the state in terms if the police, there is absolutely no justice. I think we are realizing the state, the police force, are extremely organized and so we have to be organized, too. The two things I think are important is people are and were angry and we have every right to be, and what people are doing with that anger is really important, making sure this is a long-term sustained movement, that is not just happening at Ferguson but building the roots of something that can happen at a national wide scale.

YR: Maybe talk a little bit about how anger is framed. What is different about this moment in terms of the deployment of anger turning this into a movement?

NS: Again when the case first broke, there was all this talk about looting. It's not even just the case with Mike Brown and Ferguson. Anytime black people or people of color or any

oppressed person for that matter expresses some kind of rage or anger about the way they are systematically oppressed, the people are like, “Well why don’t you just calm down?” That closes off conversation. It completely dismisses that these are very legitimate and natural human ways to respond to being oppressed and repressed. I think the way we have to frame anger is as legitimate. If everyone hasn’t read it, there is a wonderful piece by Audre Lorde called “The Uses of Anger,” and I think she speaks very eloquently—speaking about how one of the arguments about black women’s rage during the feminist movement was that it closes down conversation. I don’t think that can be the starting point. I think first and foremost we have to say anger is justified, you are definitely entitled to feel it. I think a lot of people that are involved are definitely inspired, but I also think a lot of us are just absolutely enraged. And I think that has to be accounted for, and we are justified in our rage. It’s about Mike Brown. It’s about Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride. It’s about all these individual incidents that have been happening for the last couple of years but it is also about 400 years of living under white supremacy. I feel like black people, people of color have every right to be pissed off when we are killed like animals in the street. And so even thinking about what is happening at S.U. here in Syracuse if someone would have told me a few years ago that there would be all these rallies in the course of a few weeks I probably would have laughed them out of the room. But the rage, anger and the movement that are coming up nationally are really having an effect on local struggles and on what students and all kinds of different people are thinking about. So when here in S.U. when there is a racist soccer player Hanna Strong made those vile racist and homophobic remarks in addition to the fact that there are programs for black students or students of color or scholarships that were being cut I think that the Mike Browns, the John Crawfords, the Ezell Fords were on students minds. And because this happening so frequently, it is happening so much people are like, “We have to do something.” I think that’s what makes this moment a little bit different than previous moments because we realize its not going to stop. These aren’t just flukes, these aren’t just accidents, these aren’t just deviations from an otherwise decent society. The whole society is bankrupt, it’s corrupt, it’s racist, it’s sexist, it’s homophobic, and ableist, and so I think people are like actually because this is an entrenched deep issue it is going to have to be an entrenched long-term kind of movement to fight those kinds of things.

YR: You have made these connections in terms of education. Are there broader connections beyond that and in terms of the police violence? How are these getting articulated? Is it getting articulated within the movement? And who is doing that articulation?

NS: That’s a really fantastic question. When I went on the Freedom Ride I was struck by how intersectionality are front and center. I remember before we went they sent out some guidelines in terms of what to expect, and on the first page it read, “This is a woman affirming space, this is a queer friendly space.” And so I think that those kinds of intersectional politics, are really being injected, and projected, within the movement. And I think that is very, very important. People talking about CeCe McDonald, again Renisha McBride. So I think one of the important things that I think is happening because it is a lot of times the cases that get the most attention are cisgendered, presumably heterosexual black men. Even while what was happening in Ferguson was unfurling there was a case of the Oklahoma police officer that was found sexually assaulting 8 women while we was

a police officer and all of the eight women were black. On the one hand, we are seeing that police brutality is not just something that happens against cisgendered, heterosexual black men. We are expanding the conversation that way to think about who is affected and who is on the receiving end of police brutality. But also I think another thing is to see who has been showing up. To varying degrees, there has been a labor response. And I think that is very important, connecting labor movements and unionism with social justice movements that are happening in the community.

It is also important to say Mike Brown was killed and murdered in a very particular context, in a particular set of conditions. So in Ferguson, and the greater St. Louis area, how are we to make sense of the fact that it is a predominantly black city but with a majority white political representation? Those are the things we are talking about. It is a working class community, and it is so interesting I keep going back to it but when everyone was talking about looting, everyone was like, “Why are they tearing down their own community?” Do you think black people own the Quicktrip that was burned down? Do you think black people own those businesses? With the right kind of analyses that is pushing us to think about capitalism. Who owns what in our society? Who gets the resources? Something that people have been specifically raising in Chicago is crime doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Same thing in Syracuse. When cities are disinvested from, when we slash budgets for public services, options are extremely limited in our society. When you don’t have jobs that don’t have a livable wage it leaves communities in disarray.

When you think about it in this broader context, black people, poor people, and people of color we not pathological but our communities are like planned obsolescence, set up to fail—they are not invested in. We are not just shot down by the police, those kinds of instant deaths, but also slow deaths our communities experience. And it is certainly not our fault but political officials and economic elites that pretty much ravage or leave black communities in disrepair. Those are the kinds of ways we can think about this and connect it to other things.

YR: You bring up political leaders. What were you seeing in terms of who are potentially leaders of this movement?

NS: The question of leadership that has been coming out of Ferguson I think is really, really important. When I was there after the march there was mostly women and young people. They put on a BBQ and invited us to come to the BBQ. I am 25 and sometimes I feel old, but I was really struck by how young people are playing such an important and vital role. I remember there was a woman—I wish I remembered her name. She was from a group a collective called “Lost Voices,” folks should definitely look them up. But she was talking about how they stayed at this church making sure people were getting supplies, getting food, getting water, basically being able to live and sustain themselves. She said they camped out for a week and a half straight—again, making sure that people in their community were taken care of. When we went, the folks that we were with made a really concerted effort to highlight the way that young people are playing such a crucial role in what is happening.

And something about that...I mean it was a BBQ, there was such great energy, and the kids that I remembered they wore locks and they were sagging. These are the exact kinds of kids that are targeted in these killings and society in general. But mainstream media or these bankrupt talking heads are not talking about the ways [these kids] are fighting for justice in their community. There are all the ways in which people try to pathologize saggin pants or certain kinds of black hairstyles, but the very kids people in society are trying to demonize are the very kids that are actually leading the struggle and what's happening in Ferguson. I just saw an article the other day—women taking the lead in Ferguson. So I think those are really important to point out that women and young people have really been taking a key role in what is happening in Ferguson. A lot of the young people are like we don't want the kind of old school top-down kinds of leadership. We are looking for bottom-up collective leadership. And it is a leadership that is not going to come from the more traditional spaces from which civil rights happened, so it is not coming from the church. I think there is new people who are getting a voice, who have been traditionally left out of those narratives. But it is also again, people pushing back against the Al Sharpton's, Jesse Jackson's. I remember a few months ago when it first happened there were people booing Jesse Jackson. So I think there is just a real deep-seated and rightful disgust with a lot of the ways these old-school civil rights leaders who are now millionaires are coming to wag their finger at these young people who are actually doing things.

YR: This past weekend was a weekend of a lot of activity in Ferguson. Obviously the movement in strong. What do you think are the roles of leaders like Cornel West being front and center in some of these stories? To what end in terms of the movement? Is there still potential for leaders who have been involved in these struggles to contextualize some of what has been going on?

NS: So there is a way in which the question of leadership and a break in leadership has been framed as a generational gap. But I also think we have to think about it in terms of a political gap. Because its not just the fact that all the folks from the 60's and 70's that were involved in the Civil Rights Movement are talking heads or mouthpieces of the Democratic Party. That is not always the case. One of the things that really stood out to me when we had a debriefing moment different folks got up and basically said whatever was in their heart. And there was this older gentleman and he stood up, and he just said it so eloquently. He said, "I just want to welcome you all to the struggle. This a time for you to be proud. Take your seat in this long black freedom tradition." He was like, "The same kinds of fears that you're having, we had them. The struggles, the questions, we had very many of them so I would just like to welcome you all to the struggle."

You brought up Cornel West—he's an interesting figure. Cornel West made a good point. He said, "We have to apologize." Us...we as in the older folks that he was talking about have to apologize for not doing the due diligence of caring on real progressive and or radical work. So he was alluding to the fact that basically there have been some people who have been bought off. But again going back to the point that it is a political difference, there has always been radical and revolutionary elements in previous

generations, so I think that it's important to tease out what I think is discussed as a generational difference but I think is really revealing the political differences in talking about leadership.

YR: Yeah and in thinking how it was actually systematic how this radical leadership was either disbanded or destroyed, politically, in terms of things like COINTELPRO.

NS: Yes definitely.

YR: How they targeted specifically leaders that had a certain kind of ideology. It is interesting the reframing not in terms of a generational gap. I am thinking in terms of having that historical connection and even that guidance from particular leaders. But at this point where do you feel the movement is at, or where do you want to see it headed?

NS: I think there is political opening that is happening within the movement that I think is really important. Again, it's pushing back against this top-down charismatic, masculinist leadership and thinking about more bottom collective leadership with young people, with women, with queer people taking the lead. People aren't just mobilizing in Ferguson, but they are definitely organizing. That's where I think a number of struggles and movements that are happening in the country need to go. I think that is really an important lesson that we've learned and are continuing to learn.

BK: Thank you so much to Tessa Brown, Sherri Williams, and Nikeeta Slade for joining the show. And a special thanks to Yanira Rodriguez her help in editing and interviewing for this episode. We're going to leave you with a poem, an excerpt of *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine:

And you are not the guy and still you fit  
the description because there is only one guy  
who is always the guy fitting the description.

...“Yes officer”  
rolled around on my tongue, which felt  
like it grew out of a bell that could never ring  
its emergency because its emergency  
was the tolling I would have to swallow.

In a landscape that was once an ocean bed,  
you can't drive yourself to sane—so angry  
you are crying. You can't drive yourself to sane.

...Put your hands  
where they can be seen put your  
hands in the air put your hands up.

And you are not the guy and still you fit

the description. Because there is only one guy  
who is always the guy fitting the description.

*Cue Music: “This is the End” by Springtide*

BK: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of *This Rhetorical Life* are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.