

Narratives of Police Brutality in Black Music

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“Don’t Don’t Do It!” (N.E.R.D, Pop Rap, 2017)

“Don’t Don’t Do It!” by N.E.R.D was released in December of 2017 and was directly inspired by the death of Keith Scott by the hands of the police the year prior. Scott was waiting in his minivan for his child to get off the school bus when law enforcement, who were on the hunt for another individual, approached his vehicle. The situation escalated, and he was fatally shot four times. The title phrase, which the chorus repeats, is a direct quote from Scott’s wife who can be heard yelling this, either pleading with the officers not to shoot her husband, or pleading with her husband to not do something that would further escalate the situation. This song was chosen because of the inspiration behind it, because although the lyrics themselves speak volumes, the story behind it proves the prevalence of anti-black police brutality.

The intro of the song establishes its message, with the lines just before the chorus saying, “lifting up, lifting up/ Lifting up/ Coming down, coming down/ Coming down/ Wake them up, wake them up/ To the sound.” Frank Ocean, the intro’s writer, is alluding to the way black men raise their arms to surrender when approached by the police, yet still get shot, “coming down” to meet the ground and their eventual demise. The end of each verse, as well as the refrain have this same message, with Pharrell Williams repeating, “they’re going to do it anyway,” referring to law enforcement’s pattern of resorting to violence against Black men. During the refrain and Kendrick Lamar’s verse, there is chanting and rapping over an intense electric guitar, which was not something that was heard in the other parts of the song, which happen to be very upbeat. This could symbolize the anger and rage both Lamar and Williams feel towards the corrupt system that leaves them making songs about the deaths of fellow Black men. After Lamar’s verse ends, though, the song almost instantly switches back to its upbeat and happy-go-lucky tune, commenting on how instances of police brutality can become easily forgotten among

communities who are not affected because they get to return back to their everyday lives like normal. According to a study performed by Graham et al., there seems to be a clear racial-ethnic divide, not a gradient, that shows that white Americans' worried about violence are different from POCs worries, with Hispanic and Black people living on one side of the spectrum, while white people live on the other. Seven in ten Black respondents worry about experiencing police brutality, while only a fourth of the white respondents have this worry (Graham et al., 2020). This difference in priority among Black and white people supports the prevalence of racism in our society. White Americans have the privilege and advantage of not fearing for their lives when they encounter police, while POC are severely disadvantaged, with their people being killed and experiencing police brutality at a higher rate.

“Fight the Power: Remix 2020” (Public Enemy, Hip-Hop/Rap, 2020)

“Fight the Power: Remix 2020” by Public Enemy is a remixed version of their original song “Fight the Power,” which was created in 1989. It served as the theme for Spike Lee’s movie *Do The Right Thing*, which addressed many race-related issues, including police brutality. The remix, however, was released in August of 2020 after the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd which sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the country. Remixing the song thirty years later proves that the fight against racial injustice is ongoing, and that it is important for this generation of Black individuals to unite with Black pride and “fight the power.” Bassist of Public Enemy Brian Hardgroove says that this line, though, is not synonymous with “f*** the police,” but that it refers to fighting the abuses of power, which can be directly related to the power dynamic seen between law enforcement and Black people (Esquivel, 2020). With these reasons in mind, this was a well-rounded song that could speak to the nature of police brutality with its

modern update and overall message, while also serving as an anthem of Black unity and persistence despite the injustices.

Rapsody's verse which says, "George killed, for twenty/ Think about it (think), that's two thousand pennies/ The value of black life the cost of goin' to Wendy's/ For a quarter burger ended in murder," forces us to see the value black lives hold in the hands of white power. Floyd was accused of using a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store, which ultimately led to his death. Rapsody is pointing out the stark value that Floyd's life was given because of this, just \$20, and putting it into perspective for her listeners. In the line following this, Rapsody mentions the need to fight for Breonna Taylor and her mother's pain, not feeding into the erasure of Black women's bodies and experiences that Sharrona Pearl mentions in her article (Pearl, 2020). Later in the song, YG sings, "thought he had a gun and he was black, that's the combo," referring to the many instances of police brutality where officers justify killing black men because they *think* they are armed. YG's awareness of this points to the notion of double consciousness, which refers to African Americans' dual awareness of how others see them based on racial stereotypes, vs who they know themselves to be (Burke, 2021). Even if a black man knows they are unarmed, if their hands are not visible or if they make sudden movements they could be killed, and they are aware of this. They are aware that by just being black, their mortality rate is decreased because of how they are perceived by others. The common theme that is weaved throughout is the idea of stereotypes and the corruption they bring to the lives of minorities, not just at an individual level, but at systemic level, with police brutality at the forefront.

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