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Article

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POLICE BRUTALITY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN SELECTED AFRICAN-AMERICAN HIP-HOP SONGS

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Abstract

African-Americans are Americans by birth and descent, and this accounts for their desire to be part of the American Dream. This paper adopts Critical Race Theory to study racism in the United States by examining hip-hop songs by Kendrick Lamar, Jay-Z and Nas. The study shows how police brutality affects African-Americans' desire to (also) fulfil the American Dream that signifies the "liberty" in America whereby anyone can achieve anything as far as they work hard. This freedom and inspiration to Americans to be the best version of themselves are fundamentals of their nation. However, by adopting a qualitative research where journal articles and critical essays on related subjects are explored, the study shows that police brutality is a major concern in hip-hop due to its hindrance to African-Americans in their quest to be beneficiaries of this freedom. Using hip-hop songs as case studies, the research observes that, due to racial prejudices, Americans of African descent are not exposed to the same privileges as their White counterparts in fulfilling the American Dream. It concludes that police brutality is a weapon deployed by the majority race to constantly handicap the minority, thereby maintaining their racial dominance in the society.

Keywords: Hip-hop, Police Brutality, Racism, African-American, American Dream.

Introduction

Most often, African-Americans are victims of police misconduct and this hinders them from accessing the American Dream, which intimated that every American has the right to aspire towards the best of life's possibilities. This predicament has attracted the attention of hip-hop artists who have used their art to highlight police brutality and the limited opportunities

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available to people of African ancestry in the United States. Imoh Emenyi captures this perspective when she reports that, "For most people of African descent in the United States, the American Dream of possibility has become a nightmare because its route is filled with thorns and thistles" (7). These "thorns and thistles," as spotlighted by hip-hop artists, refer to the police and the surge in unemployment, which are tools the White American race uses to suppress African-Americans. The artists bring to the fore these realities as well as critique America's claim to be a thriving democracy when in actual fact, inequality blossoms in the country. Hip-hop from its inception has dealt with diverse social issues in the African-American community, with racism as one of its major concerns. Its origin is traced to South Bronx, New York City in the 1970s, after Blacks migrated to Harlem in the North in order to escape the economic and racial tensions in the southern states of America. Even before the birth of the hip-hop culture in the 70s, Harlem was already the capital of Black aesthetics in the 1920s, birthing the renowned Harlem Renaissance. Following the Great Urban Migration, the North had become "a city of refuge" for poor working class Blacks. It is not surprising therefore that Adam Bradley writes that "Hip-Hop emerged out of urban poverty to become one of the most vital cultural forces of the past century" (xv).

Although racism was not as prevalent in the North as it was in the southern states, the economy was not favourable to people of African ancestry; hence, the Black people needed avenues for expressions, and the four elements of hip-hop became the outlet. Dan Charnas lists the four elements thus: DJing, MCing, graffiti, and breaking (xii). DJing is the art of a DJ (disc jockey) turning table and mixing records in a party, while breaking, breakdancing or b-boying/b-girling entails a dancer or dancers dancing in an athletic manner. However, the inclusion of graffiti as an element of hip-hop is often debated. Graffiti are drawings, writings or paintings made on walls, especially public walls and are sometimes illegal. These paintings are usually with powerful messages by young African-Americans. Some hip-hop heads and graffiti artists have distinguished graffiti from hip-hop, however, since its rise came with the rise of a generation known as the Hip-Hop Generation, it has generally been included in the hip-hop culture. Nevertheless, there are no controversies surrounding MCing as an element of hip-hop. In fact, it is the most prominent and the most lucrative. Although a party needs an MC (Master of Ceremonies) to anchor the event, in South Bronx, it was more than just anchoring the show; it was more importantly the ability to "talk shit" which was a prime currency in Black communities (Charnas 10). "Talking shit" is rapping or speaking with style. At intervals of songs, an MC would "spit" rhymes to the crowd, and most often it took a call-and-response format. This was the birth of rapping, which explains why a hip-hop artist is referred to as an MC or Emcee. MCing has gone beyond rocking parties to discussing the concerns of African-Americans, becoming a tool for the critique of the systemic racism in the United States and the way police brutality has been deployed as a weapon to subjugate African-Americans.

Incidents of Police Brutality in Hip-Hop

The rights and liberty of African-Americans have been violated by the police, while the opportunities to get involved in the social system have been subdued by racial oppression by the Whites. Francis Erhabor summarizes police brutality as an abuse of power by the police and extrajudicial killings (2). Further, Benedict Emesowum observes that "Police violence is a persistent epidemic plaguing many parts of America" (269). The police officers who practice this misconduct are sometimes declared not-guilty on the basis of the "Colour of Law." Since African-Americans have always been victims of police brutality, the hip-hop artists have taken it upon their art to hold the racist attitudes of the police up for scrutiny. This is shown

in “Alright,” Kendrick Lamar’s song which gives African-Americans hope that they will have access to the American Dream someday as they continue to hope on God, yet it highlights police brutality as a threat to the live of Black people. According to Lamar, ‘we hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigger,’ meaning that his community does not like the police. There is a general hatred towards the police amongst young male African-Americans, a fact that Dr. Dre affirms in “Still DRE” when he raps “Still ain’t got no love for the police.” Lamar blames the hate on the fact that police officers are always looking for an opportunity to kill African-Americans. In the process, Lamar uses a colonial naming reference for the police; the name “po-po” is an informal tag created by Blacks for police officers, which establishes the distinct nature of the Black community from the White.

With a character like Jim Crow, a racist presentation of African-Americans, created by Thomas Rice, who uses him as a microcosm for all Blacks in America, there is need for the misrepresented to counter the perception: a perception that inspired and justified the “Jim Crow” segregation laws in America. The main ideology of Jim Crow is the presentation of African-Americans as simpletons in order to justify the unfair treatment meted on them. Lamar counters such misrepresentation of the African-American in “The Blacker the Berry” as he asserts “Black don’t crack, my nigger” to signify the resoluteness of African-Americans, in relation to everything they have gone through in America. This resilience is a trait that has kept the Black people in the pursuit of the American dream as captured in various African-American literary works throughout their history. Using her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou presents how drive for success overcomes racial obstacles. It is also highlighted in Langston Hughes’ poetry, as he asserts in “Still Here,” that even though he is scarred and battered, and his hopes scattered, “...I don’t care! / I’m still here” (21). Furthermore, Lamar declares “I’m African-American, I’m African / I’m black as the moon, heritage of a small village / Pardon my residence / Came from the bottom of mankind / My hair is nappy, my dick is big, my nose is round and wide.” Lamar unapologetically traces his ancestry to Africa before proudly describing the physical attributes of Africans-Americans. This racial pride began in the Harlem Renaissance era in the opening decades of the 20th Century, continued in the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s, the Black Arts Movements of the 1960s to the present.

The racial pride projects a sense of cultural superiority and affirms Black identity. The pride in the size of his penis parallels Sybil’s experience in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as the White woman fantasizes on being raped by an African-American male whom the White American race sees as the “unspoiled child of nature” _ to use Robert Bone’s apt reference to Black primitivism. Her fantasy recreates the stereotype of the Black male sexuality as virile when compared to that of White men _ a situation which justifies White women’s preference for Black men and the eventual punishment of Black men through lynching. Ellison uses the notion of Black male virility to emasculate the White male and critique the notion of Black inferiority. This invasion of stereotype is not only physical but also mental as Lamar declares that the White man is “jealous of my wisdom.” The Black man’s doggedness despite the intensity of racial bigotry is a challenge to mainstream culture. Also, Lamar views the police as pretentious as police officers appear to protect lives whereas they are the one destroying them. That is why Lamar raps “I can tell ‘cause your ways deceitful / Know I can tell because you’re in love with desert eagle.” In explaining police brutality, he shows that the police only love the gun and care about nothing else except to kill. Further, he showcases the *modus operandi* of the Police in “Hood Politics” when he observes: “Slow motion for the ambulance, the project filled with cameras / The LAPD gambling, scrambling, football

numbers slandering / Niggers' names on paper..." His report accuses the Los Angeles Police Department of gambling with African-American lives like betting in sports as it posits that they do not carry out proper investigations before indicting a Black man.

Furthermore, in probing the realities of blackness, Jay-Z uses historical allusions to discuss police brutality in "Stream of Consciousness" which enables him to reveal the hurdles African-Americans encounter in the quest to fulfil the American dream of economic mobility by insisting that there is a difference between the contemporary African-American and the one in the era of slavery. He raps "You know when I work I ain't your slave right.... You know this ain't back in the days right?" His position is that slavery was abolished even though racism is still prevalent in the United States through police brutality on Blacks. He cites the deaths of Freddie Gray, Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin to support his position when he declares helplessly "But I can't tell, how the way they killed Freddie Gray right? / Shot down Mike Brown, how they killed Tray right?" Jay-Z uses the controversial deaths of these young African-Americans which sparked protests in their times to evoke public consciousness towards police brutality. Barajas records that "Freddie Gray was arrested by the Baltimore Police Department over his legal possession of a knife" but while being transported in a police van, Gray sustained injuries and died seven days later. His death sparked protests in Downtown Baltimore that turned violent, resulting in the burning of buildings. In Mike Brown's case, the United States' Department of Justice in a Memorandum issued on 4th March, 2015 states that "At approximately noon on Saturday, August 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department ("FPD") shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old." However, the Memo goes on to assert that Officer Wilson did not violate federal laws (4). Consequently, there were different protests in Ferguson, some were peaceful while others were violent, but these protests did not change the law's view of the Police officer towards the African-American male.

Similarly, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman who claimed he did so in self-defense after he had reported Martin to the Police for looking "suspicious." Once again, there were protests that even involved many influential African-Americans among which was U.S President at that time, Barrack Obama. Jay-Z does not narrate the events that led to the killings of these African-Americans, but addresses police brutality as an obvious phenomenon. These names have become apt reminders of the deaths of young African-American males caused by White police officers who are not charged guilty of murder. Furthermore, in "99 Problems," Jay-Z posits that the young African-American male has too many problems (ninety-nine of them) for him to worry about relationship issues, not when the police are his biggest problem in life. He dramatises the persona's experience with a police officer at a checkpoint in this excerpt:

"Son, do you know why I'm stopping you for?"

"Cause I'm young and I'm black and my hat's real low

Do I look like a mind reader, sir? I don't know

Am I under arrest or should I guess some more?"

"Well you was doing a fifty-five in a fifty-four

License and registration, and step out of the car

Are you carrying a weapon on you? I know a lot of you are"

"I ain't stepping out of shit, all my papers' legit"

"Well do you mind if I look around the car a little bit?"

"Well my glove compartment is locked, so is the trunk in the back

And I know my rights so you going to need a warrant for that"

"Aren't you sharp as tack? You some type of lawyer something?

Somebody important or something?"

"Well, I ain't passed the bar, but I know a little bit

Enough that you won't illegally search my shit"

"Well we'll see how smart you are when the K-9 come"

This conversation shows the reason for the refrain in the work of art: "I got ninety-nine problems but a bitch ain't one." In his first line, the persona establishes the reasons for police harassment: his skin colour, age and dressing. The first two reasons are natural while the last is cultural, a show of the officer's disapproval of the African-American youth culture which gives evidence to his White supremacist mentality. Since he cannot validate the "crimes": skin colour, age and dressing, the officer claims that the persona's offence is driving at high speed while also suspecting him of carrying a weapon. But realizing that the Black American knows his rights as a citizen of the United States, he intimidates him by threatening to call the K-9, the police unit in charge of police dogs. With the threat, the persona justifies his assertion that as a young African-American, he has ninety-nine problems and a woman is not one of them.

Moreover, Nas goes beyond a dialogue that exhibits police brutality to actually giving a glimpse of a racial act by the police in "Cops Shot the Kid." He compares what different scenes of police rounding up of suspects look like when he reports: "White kids are brought in alive / Black kids get hit with like five (bullets)" in order to prove that African-Americans are not given the opportunity to defend themselves by the law whereas their White counterparts have that privilege. This demonstrates the prevalence of racial discrimination in the United States and the brutal nature of police activities against Blacks whereby police officers randomly murder African-Americans instead of allowing them to stand trial. Exploring the severity of the situation, Nas adds, "The disadvantages of being brown / How in the hell the parents gon' bury their own kids / Not the other way round? / Reminds me of Emmett Till." The artist shows this in the trauma of African-American parents burying their own children, using the provocative instance of the death of Emmett Till in which his mother, Mamie Till and himself, became symbols for anti-racist movement. Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for allegedly flirting with a White woman, and none of his abductors or murderers were found guilty of murder. They were all acquitted; as such, his mother, Mamie Till, opened his casket during the funeral for all to see the mutilated body of her child. The poet follows the line with "Let's remind 'em why Kap kneels" to accentuate that racial injustice prompts anti-racist protests as in the days of Mamie Till and the recent "taking a knee" during the rendition of the US National Anthem started by Collin Kaepernick. Taking a knee is a peaceful and respectful act of protest where African-American athletes kneel when the national anthem is sung in order to draw attention to racism and police brutality. It has become an anti-racist symbol even in England and across Europe. The artist uses the references of Emmet Till and Collin Kaepernick to identify the African-American as both the victim and combatant of racism.

Putting the discourse on police brutality within the appropriate context, Nas counters the notion that the murder of Black people by the police is due to self-defense when he raps: "I know every story got two sides / Claiming he paranoid by the black guy / Cop wanna make it home by nighttime / Just a good kid, he wasn't the guy / Had a little hit, he wasn't that high / Cop gon' claim that it was self-defense / Say he was riding dirty so the case rests." This unwarranted suspicion the police officer has for African-Americans is shown in Diallo's murder in which the police officers claimed he was shot because he wanted to pull out a gun,

but investigations showed that he wanted to show them his ID card. Once a police officer plays the “self-defense” card, the case is closed as brutality is justified by the officers’ claim they are only defending themselves. Nas follows up his declarations with a repeated chant of “The cops shot the kid” and he describes the kid as someone who was “working nine to five,” “trying to stay alive” and “making ends meet.” This paints an apt picture of police brutality on a victim who is only struggling to fulfil his American Dream, but the dream is brutally cut short by the Police. Furthermore, in “One Mic,” Nas gives a depiction of police brutality thus: “Police watch us, roll up and try knocking us / One knee I ducked, could it be my time is up / But my luck, I got up, the cop shot again.” The persona is shot at but he manages to dodge the bullet only to be shot at again by the police. This encounter contrasts the narrative that the murder of Black Americans by the police is always a mistake as the second shot by the officers shows the contrary. Therefore, police violence on people of African ancestry in the United States is brought to the fore as a well-planned and executed menace that has the backing of the mainstream Anglo-American culture.

Language Use in Selected African-American Hip-Hop Songs

The major features of poetry are the literary devices. A poet exploits these resources in the presentation of his art, embellishing it with beauty. Bradley observes that of all forms of poetry, hip-hop is the greatest archive of rhymes (43). Rhyming is a major component and marker of hip-hop which explains why a rapper’s lyric book is called a book of rhymes. Hip-hop artists use diverse rhyme patterns and other poetic devices in their texts. In “Alright,” Kendrick Lamar uses a monosyllabic rhyme scheme at the end of the lines: “Boys and girls, I think I’ve gone cray / Drown inside my vices all day.” He uses the lines to show his mental state as an African-American frustrated at his nation. Also, Lamar uses this skill when he reports the evil in his community with the line: “I can see the evil, I know when it’s illegal.” Lamar uses the same device in “Hood politics” in the lines: “Came in this game, you stuck your fangs in this game / You wore no chain in this game, your hood, your name in this game.” He creates a rhyming sound from “came,” “game,” “fang,” “chain” and “name” in the lines that show the depravity in his community. Furthermore, he decries the state of the polity in America and highlights the divisions in the country; whether it is the two political parties, the two major gangs or the races, Lamar shows a country in division. In a sarcastic tone, he states “From Compton to Congress, set tripping all around / Ain’t nothing new, but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-licans / Red state versus blue state, which one you governing?” This does not only show the disparities in the nation, but the artist also uses neologism to compare them with the two gangs (Crips and Blood) in his hometown, Compton. Coincidentally, Crips use a blue bandana while Blood uses a red bandana.

In order to highlight the human-infesting role of the politicians, he uses “flu” instead of “few” to emphasize his message. The divisions in the United States are not limited to political ideologies or gangs but they are more devastating when linked with races. Upon establishing the distinction between the races, he shows how it affects African-Americans through the operations of the police. He raps “Slow motion for the ambulance, the project filled with cameras / The LAPD gambling, scrambling, football numbers slandering / Niggers names on paper.” Lamar compares the operational memorandum of the Los Angeles Police Department against African-Americans to a game of gambling with the names of Blacks used in place of soccer teams. The implication of this mode of operation is Lamar’s sarcastic explanation for the attitude of the Police towards innocent young African-American males. This means that to be arrested, manhandled or murdered by the Police is only a matter of chance as the life of the African-American male does not matter. Also, in the “The Blacker

the Berry,” Lamar declares “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.” He uses berries as a metaphor for humans. Notably, blackberries are the healthiest and sweetest, thereby implying that the Black race is superior. He goes on to use the device in the line “Know I can tell because you’re in love with that desert eagle.” He uses the name of a gun as a representation of police brutality, opining that the police are not bothered about protecting Black lives but destroying them. He also avers that he is “making a killing” in order to transfer the idea of making a living to murder. The usage presents the argument that the African-American persona has been subjected into crime (murder) has a livelihood.

Moreover, in order to showcase Black resilience and pride, Jay-Z asserts with a double negation in the line: “I don’t take no checks; I take my respect.” The use of a double negation is a predominant feature of African-American Vernacular English (Ebonics). The line shows the artist’s pride in his heritage as he declares that his culture is not up for sale, stating it in his language. In addition, he deploys reappropriation when he turns the derogatory label on Black people, “nigger,” to a word of camaraderie with his fellow African-Americans as he observes: “...I don’t need no middle man to talk to my niggers.” Also, he expresses his resolve to stay true to his artistry without concession with a multisyllabic rhyme scheme as he reports: “Jimmy Iovine offered a safety net / Google dangled around a crazy check.” Although not clearly stated, the reference to Jimmy Iovine, a billionaire record label owner, and Google, arguably the most popular search engine in the internet, presupposes that the artist turned down appealing offers that would have compromised his art. Also, Nas, in “Cops Shot the Kid,” shows the irony in the experiences of the Black people in the United States because the same person who assaults him is the one he is supposed to call when assaulted. As such, he laments “Tell me, who do we call to report crime / If 9-1-1 doing the driveby?” In using the metonymy “9-1-1,” which is the emergency dial for the police in the US, he buttresses the point that the Black man has no one to report crimes to. Similarly, the use of “driveby,” an African-American slang for describing shootings by gang members from a moving vehicle, compares police brutality to gang activities. To the African-American, the police officer is a gangster who also occupies the office of the one who should end gang activities. Nas contradicts the essentialist notion of the colonizer who brings order, and presents him/her as the one responsible for societal ills, as a counter narrative to the hegemony widely spread to justify the White supremacy.

Furthermore, in “One Mic,” Nas uses multisyllabic rhyme scheme with internal rhymes in the following lines that show a brutal encounter with the police: “Bus stop, glass burst, a fiend drops his Heineken / Ricocheting between the spots that I’m hiding in.” He also uses his vernacular English in “One Mic” when he vows “I’m a rep to the death of it.” “I’m a” is a contraction of “I’m going to” which is a contraction of “I am going to,” while “rep” is an abbreviation of “represent.” His assertion showcases his willingness to combat police brutality even at the cost of his life. Additionally, he makes use of internal rhymes in the lines: “Just a good kid, he wasn’t that guy / Had a little hit, he wasn’t that high.” Nas does not claim that the African-American race is a perfect one, but points out the unfair treatment meted on them by the police.

Conclusion

Hip-hop artists have used their arts to portray police misconduct against African-Americans in the United States. Some have used historic names as references to these realities, thereby depicting this as a tactic by Whites to annihilate Black culture but retain theirs as dominant. They have placed the discourse within the same context with the American Dream to bring to the fore the hypocrisy in the nation that has refused to merge equality with freedom for

Americans with Black skin. Police brutality in America is not just a menace on the Black community, it is a reflection of the hypocrisy in American democracy. In this work, hip-hop recreates vivid scenarios of racial discriminations in the United States in order to portray how this bigotry plays out in police brutality against African-Americans and the unequal opportunities people of African ancestry are subjected to. The Anglo-American race occupies the place of the colonizer who uses different tools to subjugate the African-American people in order to sustain White supremacy in America. The racist disposition of the police, with the backing of the Law makes it difficult for an African-American man to feel safe and protected in his society while also denying him access to fulfil the American Dream as his White counterpart. These artists critique racism in order to show the hypocrisy in America's democracy and reveal its consequences on the African-American community in the United States.

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