John Sandberg

Professor DiEdwardo

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A Song Worth Singing Along To

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Letter to Professor

Through the course of the first semester, I feel as though I have taken great strides as a writer. A quick glance at each of my three essays would prove just that. From meetings with the writing center and Professor DiEdwardo, to late night writers block, I have prevailed and persevered all that English 011 has thrown at me. The daily blog kept me in line with my writing and forced me to stay on top of my work whenever I floated astray.

This paper let me express my humanitarian side that I have yet to touch on thus far. I really enjoyed writing about a topic that I am so passionate about. I hope that my passion can be seen through the words in this essay.

A Song Worth Singing Along To

Through my call to action, I am bringing attention to my readers the fact that racial issues in Hollywood as well as police brutality towards African Americans derived long before the social issues we see today. The current debate about police targeting young African Americans is in the forefront of all news outlets. There is still a debate occurring in Hollywood about the misrepresentation of African American achievements. Though there is still controversy regarding the unfair treatment of African American entertainers, the trend originated during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s with the rap group N.W.A. The group was formed by a mix of up-and-coming rappers who shared a similar dream of finding success in the music industry. At the time, there were not many, if any, mainstream African American artists. No famous African American artist would ever promote a controversial topics, rather they would stay on the safer side with regards to lyrics. The rap group N.W.A changed the way minority artists respond to racism in America. We now see artists such as Kendrick Lamar, John Legend, and Eminem singing about the racial divide and police brutality in America. Through my investigation on the impact of social justice and change, I have found N.W.A. to lead a successful charge for change, with still more to go until police brutality and African American targeting cease to exist.

The start of N.W.A’s social impact was not witnessed by the mainstream until the popularized song, “F!\*k Tha Police” was released. Prior to the release, the rap group slowly tried to establish themselves as the premier rap group. They often sang about their tough experiences growing up in Compton, CA. But, they never sang to the controversial extent present in their infamous song, “F!\*k Tha Police”. This song's proud justification of violence against the police did not go unnoticed by law enforcement, who refused to provide security for N.W.A's shows.[[1]](#footnote-1) The listeners demonstrated the impact the group had on them by showing up to N.W.A’s concerts in great numbers. Many listeners finally felt empowered against the injustice of the law enforcement system. For one particular concert in Detroit, the FBI issued a warning letter to the rap group to not perform the song that denounced the police. They cited that the song caused an illegal encouragement of violence towards police. The group, being the social justice catalysts they were, performed the song despite the official notice against it. During the song, police officers stormed the stage and the group fled the scene, only to be chased down by the police. This was the first time that an artist was ordered not to perform a song. The ordinance goes against a pillar of the American way, freedom of speech. MC Ren, a member of N.W.A, spoke of the ridiculousness the group dealt with from the police. He asserts, “The FBI claim that 'F--k tha Police' incites violence and has been responsible for the death of police officers is bullshit. There was violence long before NWA came along, the same as there was profanity, and there'll be violence and profanity long after we've gone. If the FBI are looking for a cause of violence, they should take note of what's on TV."[[2]](#footnote-2) MC Ren highlights the wrongful attack by the police on N.W.A. The police use N.W.A. as a scapegoat for violence when in fact they should be looking elsewhere, such as their own wrongdoings. N.W.A. is a perfect scapegoat because of their questionable and controversial lyrics. But, these lyrics, especially in “F!\*k Tha Police”, act as a catalyst for social change only possible due to their national platform. The courageous performance by N.W.A. proves them to be a willing leader for change in a time when few, if any, famous minorities were taking a stand against discrimination.

The black and white communities have long been divided by race. Prior to N.W.A., the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s attempted to close the gap between blacks and whites. Where N.W.A differed from the earlier movements was the platform they used to close the gap. Having a national audience, and being role models to many young African Americans, N.W.A had a real chance to make a positive impact on the minds of many young adults. Though some of their lyrics provoked division instead of inclusion, their ultimate goal was to have a unified country of multiple races. The mistreatment of blacks was not just brought upon by police, but also whites who acted as their companions. In the movie  “Straight Outta Compton”, which is based on the rise and fall of N.W.A., a white manager grows close to the group, and then proceeds to take advantage of them by taking most of their money. From this act, N.W.A. and many other African Americans lose trust in whites. Along with their co-workers, much of the disconnect between races lies in the brutality from police towards African Americans. As recorded in the movie, police were often unnecessarily rough towards blacks, especially N.W.A. In the first verse of “F!\*k Tha Police”, Ice Cube, one of the members of N.W.A., raps, “So police think they have the authority to kill a minority”.[[3]](#footnote-3) He expresses his frustration towards the targeting of the black community by police. As written by Bakari Kitwana, a hip-hop historian, there was a large divide occurring from the war on drugs. "One of the important phenomenons that's going on in the country was the crack cocaine explosion and the war on drugs, and so you have the police kind of beginning to move into this paramilitary style of policing, and really targeting black and brown neighborhoods.”[[4]](#footnote-4) One of the main reasons why the police were so against the minority, and consequently there was such a divide between blacks and whites, was the drug issue in America. White policeman now had a tangible reason to target the black community. Again, the scapegoat for an American issue as a whole is the African American population. N.W.A. attempted to make the divide nonexistent with their denouncing of police, but instead it only sparked rage within both communities, as white police targeted black citizens more and in turn black citizens grew bitter towards the white community.

While the police brutality towards blacks represents the divide between races, it was not only white policeman who targeted blacks. As seen in the movie as well as through the lyrics of N.W.A’s infamous song, black police were just as likely to target the minority. Ice Cube recites, “But don't let it be a black and a white one 'cause they'll slam ya down to the street top black police showing out for the white cop”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ice Cube’s feelings towards black cops are just as bad as his feeling towards their white counterparts. His problem with black cops is their desire to impress their co-workers. The black cops, in N.W.A.’s mind, are supposed to protect African Americans from the “evil” white cops. Instead, they help enforce the hatred and discrimination. The black community feels even more in danger as not even the people of their own race in power are willing to defend them. N.W.A. raps about black police to inform their audience of the misinterpretation of police in society. Most of the African American community saw the white police as the only people against them, when in fact they has to be cautious of the police of their own race.

As aforementioned, N.W.A was not only the first major rap group to put racial issues at the forefront of their platform, but they also sparked insight into the artists of today. One rapper in particular, Kendrick Lamar, is very outspoken in the media representing the entire oppressed black community. Carvell Wallace, a writer for the music website “Pitchfork”, describes Kendrick’s music beautifully. “It is about the humanity of every other black person whose face is painted on the mural of this wall of sound. The question then becomes how hard and for how long will America continue to fight, deny, or ignore this humanity.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Kendrick Lamar, just like N.W.A. before him, raps to draw attention to racial issues in America. During one of the many police brutality protests in 2015, it was made known to all of America the real impact Kendrick Lamar has on the African American community. At a protest at Cleveland State University, activists chanted lyrics from one of Kendrick’s racially charged songs. “It’s gonna be alright”, they chanted as to say that African Americans will prevail from this unfair discrimination from whites and police alike. Kendrick spoke, and black lives activists listened. In an interview with the Observer, Lamar discussed reasons for producing the song: “It’s already in your blood because I am Trayvon Martin, you know. I’m all of these kids. It’s already implanted in your brain to come out your mouth as soon as you’ve seen it on the TV. I had that track way before that, from the beginning to the end, and the incident just snapped it for me.”[[7]](#footnote-7) One reason that Kendrick is so influential is because his songs relate to everyone who listens to them. Just as many people’s animosity towards police was exposed following N.W.A.’s controversial lyrics, riots from the masses regarding racial issues were sparked by Kendrick defending the black community in his lyrics. Before Kendrick Lamar displayed his courage, many people felt  isolated in their fear of police brutality. Kendrick brought people together when he wrote about living vicariously through the victims of discrimination and police brutality. The current attempt at social change through music is a mirror image of the venture by N.W.A. three decades ago. Similar to N.W.A. before him, Kendrick Lamar uses his national audience to positively impact the lives of those who are discriminated against in an attempt to bring blacks and whites together.

The concept of studying music is now a reality as more people discover the social impact it has on society. N.W.A. began promoting change in their music decades ago, but not until recently have scholars been identifying lyrics as a form of academia. In the forefront of this charge is James Peterson, a Lehigh professor and active advocate for music, more specifically hip-hop. Peterson recalls the reaction he received after expressing interest in studying hip-hop. “I was often challenged by academicians on the limited impact that rap music could make.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Peterson knew that the excitement towards rap music in the 1990’s was not just a phase, rather a cultural shock that would revolutionize the music industry and American culture alike. Only now, as we watch the Billboard top 100 chart fill with hip-hop songs, is hip-hop truly making an impact on America. James Peterson knew that hip-hop would not only be popular in the short term with African Americans, but also in the long run with all races. Hip-hop is able to be so effective in bringing cultures together because of its popularity with the white community. The lyrics are powerful yet if only heard by African Americans, they would not incite the necessary change. N.W.A. did not have a large white audience, and therefore did not completely close the gap between races, but the hip-hop artists of today are in the process of accomplishing the task that N.W.A. started before them. I have found N.W.A. successful in leading a charge for change, but there are still vast improvements to be done in order for discrimination towards African Americans to end.

1. *Song Facts*, www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=6346. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Song Facts*, www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=6346. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. N.W.A. “Fuck Tha Police.” 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Young, Robin, and Bakari Kitwana. “KUOW.” *KUOW*, 14 Aug. 2015, kuow.org/post/straight-outta-compton-reminder-nwa-lyrics-were-controversial-poignant. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. N.W.A. “Fuck Tha Police.” 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wallace, Carvell. “On Kendrick Lamar and Black Humanity.” *On Kendrick Lamar and Black Humanity* , Pitchfork, 19 Mar. 2015, pitchfork.com/thepitch/704-on-kendrick-lamar-and-black-humanity/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lynskey, Dorian. “Kendrick Lamar: 'I Am Trayvon Martin. I'm All of These Kids'.” *The Observer*, Guardian News and Media, 21 June 2015, www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/21/kendrick-lamar-interview-to-pimp-a-butterfly-trayvon-martin. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Peterson, James Braxton. “Roll over, Rock'n'roll – Rap Music Is Here to Stay.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 8 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/08/rap-rock-us-music-hip-hop. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)