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We Gon' Be Alright

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Senior Thesis

Final Draft

In times of tragedy, music's expressive power is ever more clear. When faced with adversity, hardship, and loss, people can find relief and strength through musical expression. A recent example of this phenomenon is the musical reactions to the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager who was killed two years ago by a white police officer. In response to Michael Brown's death, many musicians from the Black community began using their art to voice their distress at the injustice faced by the Black community at the hands of the police in America.

The music and lyrics in these responses, are crafted in a way that allows the listeners to identify with the music and consider their own relationship toward the Michael Brown shooting, and police violence against Black Americans as a whole. These artists use music as a tool to unite the listeners, particularly Black listeners, against the oppression of Black Americans at the hands of the police.

This paper will detail how these musical responses share certain traits, and how they unite listeners by representing and embodying the various emotional and social states associated with grief, unity, and resistance to oppression. My analysis will focus on the lyrical and sonic aspects of the music, applying Thomas Turino's method of semiotic analysis of music, to create both an understanding of the pieces

of music as well as an interpretation of the emotional states communicated by the songs. (Turino, 2008)

In order to appropriately analyze the musical responses of these musicians, I have developed a two-part methodology to properly review the pieces. First, I analyzed the lyrics. This includes an assessment of all of the pieces' lyrics as they relate to Michael Brown specifically, police violence against black Americans, or black oppression in general. Secondly, I analyzed the pieces using the tool of semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs, in which a sign can be anything that can be perceived by an individual that symbolizes or calls to mind something, thus having an effect on the individual's emotional and cognitive experience. I implemented semiotics as they are used by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino, specifically focusing on the musical signs called icon and index. (Turino, p. 5-10) Icon refers to meaning communicated through resemblance of imitation in music. For example, in classical music, a composer might use rolling timpani to conjure the feeling of hearing thunder. The listener, upon hearing the rolling timpani and its imitation of thunder in a storm, forms an iconic relationship with the music. (Turino, p.7) Another example is in the music of Kendrick Lamar, where, in a few songs ("The Art of Peer Pressure", "M.A.A.D City"), an individual can be heard making the noise "doo doo doo" or "yah yah yah", which in the context, mimics the sound of a gun firing. (Lamar, 2012) This has the effect of conjuring the image of someone firing a gun, which is the exact purpose of the composer in this situation.

Indexical musical signs are the ones I focus on in this study. Indexical signs are associated with one's own experiences. For example, when I hear the song

“Always” by Blink-182, I will always remember kissing Courtney Beck when I was 12-years-old. I have a specific association with that music. This can also work in larger, more general circumstances, for example when a group of people hear the fight song from their former high school, that experience may conjure memories or feelings from their time in high school. (Turino, 2008) Together, this lyrical and semiotic analysis will allow me to unveil the commonalities within each of these pieces of music and how they might communicate emotionally to the listener. But first, I’ll briefly describe the event that served as the inspiration for the pieces included in my study.

In the afternoon on August 9th, 2014, an eighteen-year-old Michael Brown stole a pack of cigarettes from a gas station. When the police found him, Officer Darren Wilson and Michael Brown had a brief, heated verbal exchange, which ended with Officer Wilson exiting his car, firing six shots aimed at Brown’s torso, killing him instantly. (NY Times, 2014) The news of this killing spread, and the world watched aghast as riots began to break out near Ferguson, Missouri, Michael’s former home. Activists, artists, politicians, athletes, and citizens all over the world began sharing their outrage and shock. Social media played a massive role as videos of protesters began making their way through the pages of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and online news outlets throughout the world. The images and stories coming from Ferguson reached almost every potential eye in the world connected by the internet, and began to fan the flames of inspiration for many. On December 4th, 2014, Questlove, a recording artist of the Black American community, took to

Instagram to voice his outrage, and call on artists of all forms to create music with meaning to address the lack of justice in lives of Black Americans. (Questlove, 2014)

Questlove's message was no doubt heard, but in some cases was not necessary. Just eleven days after the death of Michael Brown, Miss Lauryn Hill, released a sketch titled "Black Rage," in which she outlines many of the causes of anger within the Black community. She writes:

Black Rage is founded on blatant denial

Squeezed economics, subsistence survival

Deafening silence and social control,

Black Rage is founded on wounds in the soul (Hill, 2014)

Hill's lyrics discuss the anger and frustration she and many others have faced as a result of years of mistreatment and oppression. She outlines the forces which have contributed to the continuing oppression of the Black community in American history.

Sonically, "Black Rage" borrows the melody from "My Favorite Things", a tune made famous by Julie Andrews in the musical, *The Sound of Music*. Hill's use of this melody, originally a joyful song listing the pleasantries which the main character, Maria, thinks of when she is feeling sad or afraid to outline the harsh realities the American black community, creates a feeling of uneasy familiarity, as the indexical relationship of the melody becomes apparent to the listener, only to be darkened with the processing of change in lyrical content. Within the context of the film, (in which Julie Andrew's character Maria and the family she takes care of deal with the growing threat of the Nazi party), the song is a relief from new dark

presence in the families' lives. In the time since the film's release, the song has become a staple of white society. This is precisely why the borrowed melody works so well in Hill's piece. The song's context addresses positivity in the face of fear, but when altered by Hill to reflect Black society, the content becomes a dark, honest evaluation of the forces working against Black Americans.

Hill's message is particularly effective due to her keeping the refrain, but by changing the word "feel" to "fear": "When I'm feeling sad / I simply remember all these kinds of things / and then I don't fear so bad" (Hill, 2014) This lyric change reflects the fact that Hill and other members of the Black community truly *fear* for their lives and livelihoods as a result of the actions of the police and of many of the oppressive forces listed by Hill in the song.

Black rage is the manifesting reaction within the Black community to the oppressive forces Hill mentions. In writer David Drake's review of the track for Pitchfork Media, he highlights how the concept of "Black rage" has been taken back by Hill, used as a method which may be used by the Black community to fight against oppressive forces. He writes, "'Black Rage' is a key record for this moment because it recognizes our problems are deeply entrenched, and that postmodern detachment or cynical capitalism are poorly formed tools for people hoping to make a sustained attack on widespread systemic violence. Lauryn Hill celebrates black rage not as a raw expression of pain, nor as an irrational behavior that must be reigned in. Like Maria Rainer, it's a coping mechanism, but for Lauryn Hill, it's also something more: a practical strategy." (Drake, 2014) He suggests that Hill is using her music to focus the conversation about police violence against Black people on

recognizing factors contributing to Black oppression, and working relentlessly to topple them. This track has had a notable effect on many of the listeners, providing them with their own opportunity to post thoughts and feelings about the situation she illustrates. In the comments section on Hill's Soundcloud page, listeners have posted responses like, "Beautiful", "Respect", "Deep words for the struggle", and "this message is so important to our community!" (Hill, 2014)

The same month as Hill's release, rapper J. Cole released a track "Be Free" in which he expresses his sorrow on hearing of Michael Brown's death. He writes:

All we wanna do is take the chains off
 All we wanna do is break the chains off
 All we wanna do is be free
 All we wanna do is be free
 Can you tell me why
 Every time I step outside I see me niggas die
 I'm letting you know

That there ain't no gun they make that can kill my soul (Cole, 2014)

The repetition of the lyric "*All we wanna do is break the chains off*" clearly describes Cole's imagery of a black American community that is very much still dealing with social, economic, and cultural consequences of slavery. The actual repetition of the music begins to create a sense of urgency to the lyric, which provokes in the listener a sense of mourning and burden.

Cole's sorrowful tone is deepened by including recordings of a testimony of Dorian Johnson, one of Michael Brown's close friends, who was an eyewitness to his

killing. This indexical feature brings forth memories for the many listeners who first heard the interview through media outlets and the emotions they felt at that moment; but with the constant sonic companionship of the self-produced beat, the spoken words of Johnson elicit a darker and more emotional response for the listener. Johnson's testimony describes the events immediately preceding Brown's death. As the monotonous beat continues in the background, the spoken narrative gives a description of those events to the listener, recreating the imagery of the event. As the listener hears this, they reprocess the events, from the perspective of one who was there and who witnessed and felt the tragedy first hand.

Shortly after this J. Cole release, Philadelphia rapper G.A.G.E released the track "I Am Mike Brown", with an accompanying music video. G.A.G.E. alludes to past incidents of young black men falling victim to gun violence and also discusses the injustice surrounding the death of Michael Brown at the hands of the police, particularly due to his age:

They let Zimmerman off, this cop ain't learn from Trayvon.

I'm just sitting here dropping a little tear and knowledge,

because Mike Brown didn't even live to see a day of college.

He would have started soon, now there's an empty seat in class.

All because of these demons hiding behind a badge (G.A.G.E., 2014)

Here, G.A.G.E. expresses what many felt after hearing the news of Michael Brown's death: a deep sadness and shock at the completely unnecessary and unjust loss of a young life. But further in, G.A.G.E. begins to criticize the community of Ferguson's initial response to the shooting, which was rioting and looting within the city. He says:

But some of these stores y'all lootin' is black owned

I know it's for a cause but some of them still got families at home.

It's not a black and white thing, it's about abusing the law.

I can't imagine Dorian's face when he saw Mike fall." (G.A.G.E., 2014)

Of significance here is G.A.G.E.'s revelation that the issue of police violence against black Americans really isn't a black or white issue, but about creating a country and community within which people of all ethnic backgrounds should feel safe in the presence of those who are supposed to serve them. This is a strong message to the listener, because it evokes a feeling of unity, of coming together regardless of differences for a common good. "I Am Mike Brown" also contains dialogue from an interview with Brown's mother, creating another indexical relationship with the listener, in which he or she is drawn into the emotional reality of the situation by hearing a sound bite that pulls him/her back in time to the moment he first would have heard the clip, which presumably was on the news at some point earlier.

The symbolism in video is apparent from the first few seconds, in which we see G.A.G.E, a man of color, being pulled over by a by a police vehicle for apparently no reason. Throughout the rest of the piece, the shots cycle back and forth between G.A.G.E. rapping and images of protests in Ferguson. This has the effect of legitimizing the words of G.A.G.E., as his lyrics are rapped over actual images of the aftermath of the shooting.

In December of 2014, neo-soul icon D'Angelo interrupted a 14-year hiatus to release a third full-length album, titled *Black Messiah*. The album addresses many

similar themes to D'Angelo's previous music, such as love and lust, but primarily the album furthers the discussion of what the black American experience is today. In the album's liner notes, while addressing the title of the album D'Angelo writes: "For me, the title is about all of us. It's about the world. It's about an idea we call all aspire to. We should all aspire to be a Black Messiah. It's about people rising up in Ferguson and in Egypt and in Occupy Wall Street and in every place where a community has had enough and decides to make change happen." (D'Angelo, 2014)

Within the album, his song "The Charade" addresses the struggle and oppression of the black community in America today.

All we wanted was a chance to talk

'Stead we only got outlined in chalk

Feet have bled a million miles we've walked

Revealing at the end of the day, the charade (D'Angelo, 2014)

D'Angelo speaks of this charade as the phony lie in which black Americans are forced to live, one in which their country claims to be one of unity and diversity, but in actuality is one in which black people face a specific and constant oppressive and sometimes violent set of discriminatory factors.

Rapper Kendrick Lamar, released the top selling and critically acclaimed album, *To Pimp A Butterfly* in February of 2015. One of the singles off of that album, "Alright" addresses the concept of unity and hope within the black community. The lyrics in the verse address anger in the face of police oppression, while ending with a message of unity.

When you know, we been hurt, been down before, nigga

When my pride was low, lookin' at the world like, 'where do we go, nigga?'
And we hate Popo, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigga
I'm at the preacher's door my knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow but
we gon' be alright (Lamar, 2015)

Here Kendrick manages to address his perception of current attitudes within the black community. The lyric "We been hurt, been down before,...pride was low" alludes to past grievances against the Black community, "where do we go?" alludes to a helplessness and hopelessness felt by many in the Black community in the face of these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and "we hate Popo, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure" alludes to the now obvious tension between the black community and the police.

With just these few bars, Kendrick manages to outline some essential aspects of the black communities' struggle against police violence. Past tensions and acts of oppression, desperation in regards to the future, anger against the police specifically. Here Kendrick calls on the black community to stand together. "**We gon'** be alright" here refers to the American black community as a whole.

The accompanying music video reinforces this message. Here we see Kendrick beginning the video with a two-minute monologue outlining his personal journey, both spiritually and literally. Near the end of the monologue, we see a black man slammed to the ground by a white police officer, attempt to run away from the police officer, and subsequently see the officer's gun fired at the running man. While this is happening, Kendrick raps: "While my loved ones was fighting a continuous war back in the city/ I was entering a new one / A war that was based on Apartheid

and discrimination.” After this sequence, we see Kendrick and a few of his record label companions sitting in a car, rapping a short intro. As the shot pans away, it is revealed that the car is in fact being carried by four white police officers. Later in the music video we encounter multiple images of black individuals dancing or singing on top of police vehicles.

This imagery of the black community literally standing above the police is a perfect visual representation Kendrick’s message of unity. These visuals serve as a metaphor for Kendrick’s call to the black community to rise above the oppression and violence represented by the police.

This piece has had real world impact in the protest of police violence. People began changing the chorus at a protest of the arrest of a 14-year-old black male in Cleveland. (Gordon, 2015) This is an example, in the most literal way, of people using the music to unite as they stand against black oppression. The same thing happened later at a Donald Trump rally. Trump, who is seen by many as a racist and a bigot, held an event for his presidential campaign at the University of Illinois. A group of posters (mostly comprised of people of color), began chanting “We Gon’ Be Alright” when news broke out that Trump would in fact not speak. (Brown, 2016) This use of Lamar’s music as a tool for unification is the essential aspect of the music’s ability within the context of this social movement. Previously in the long and grievous history of Black oppression in the US, there have been many examples of Black musicians releasing music that expressed strong emotional reactions to oppression from a largely white police force.

In 1992, Rodney King, a taxi driver involved in a high-speed chase, was brutally beaten by four white members of the Los Angeles Police Department. Video footage of the beatings was released to news outlets, shortly after Rodney King was released from jail. However, on April 29th, when the four white officers were acquitted for the beatings, immense riots, mainly involving black community members, ensued around the greater Los Angeles area. (Adams, 2016)

One of the musical responses to this incident was Ice Cube's "We Had To Tear This Mothafucka Up." In this piece, Ice Cube embodies that boiled over frustration and rage felt by the black community members of south/central Los Angeles at events of and following the Rodney King beating. Once again, this piece includes sound bites of previous political figures and new anchors discussing rioting and the jury decision, creating an indexical relationship with the listener. Lyrically, the piece is an embodiment of pure rage against the white police officers.

I can't trust, a cracker in a blue uniform

Stick a nigga like a unicorn

Born, wicked, Laurence, Powell, foul

Cut his fuckin throat and I smile

Go to Simi Valley and surely

Somebody knows the address of the jury

Pay a little visit, "Who is it?" (Ohh it's Ice Cube)

"Can I talk to the grand wizard," then boom!!

Make him eat the barrel, modern day feral

Now he's zipped up like Leather Tuscadero

Pretty soon we'll catch Sergeant Koon

Shoot him in the face, run up in him with a broom (Jackson, 1991)

Here Ice Cube is directly fantasizing about violent acts against the police officers that beat Rodney King and the jury responsible for acquitting them. This may serve as a form of emotional expression for those who feel such anger and frustration at the hands of such immense injustice.

Similarly, in Dr. Dre's song, "The Day Tha Niggaz Took Over", Dre, along with Snoop Dogg and RBX describe their own sentiments and feelings during the looting and riots. They rap,

They wonder where me bailing and don't really understand

The reason why me take me law in me own hand

Me not out for peace and me not Rodney King

Me gun goes click, me gun goes bang

Them riot in Compton and them riot in Long Beach

Them riot in they Lakers and don't really wanna see

Niggas start to loot and police start to shoot

Lock us down at seven o'clock, barricade us like Beirut

Me don't show no love cause it's us against them (Dre, 1991)

Here the musicians voice an opinion very similar to Ice Cube's. They express a sentiment of boiled over frustration, indicated by references to looting and violence.

While these musicians' message is certainly not one of unity, its place in the historic understanding of hip-hop's reaction to police violence is very important.

They are giving voice to the frustration felt by multitudes of people in the Black community, particularly after the events surrounding the Rodney King beating. These are examples of expression within music as a reaction to police brutality against members of their community.

In conclusion, the musical commonalities in the examples I have described illicit anger, loss, and reflection, particularly for listeners who identify as members of the Black community. They are emblematic of the listeners' processing of the music and the events which they describe, which is evident in events such as the spontaneous use of Kendrick Lamar's "We gon' be alright" as a means of protest. The use of certain lyrical phrases in conjunction with selected examples of semiotics are used create within the listener. Music's ability to unite communities is particularly apparent when there is a specific cause for that unity. The loss of innocent lives at the hands of a force designed to protect them is a cause that many would stand behind. These musical examples, by way of the emotional state they illicit in the listener, generate empathy toward the loss of this innocence. This creates a distinct cultural cohort of people who feel this empathy. It is this empathy that unites them. In the 1960s people chanted "We Shall Overcome", now they chant "We Gon' Be Alright."

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