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Hip Hop and Policing

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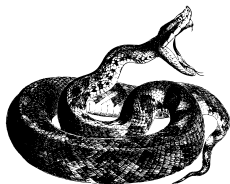
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BAG OF SNAKES MICROPRESS

“Trying to talk with people
about prisons is like trying to
hand them a ***bag of snakes***.
They won’t take it and they sure
don’t want to look inside.”

— Daniel Berrigan
Jesuit priest and anti-war activist

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Sound of da Police: How KRS-One
Led the Way for Hip Hop's Critique
of American Policing

By Donald F. Tibbs



Scan QR Code to Watch
Sound of da Police by KRS-One

Hip Hop artist KRS-One, whose moniker stands for “Knowledge Reigns Supreme,” shows how rap music uses art to dialogue and openly critique law, race, and the Fourth Amendment. Here, I will show the connective fissures of race and legal consciousness during the early years of Hip Hop to demonstrate the power of Hip Hop’s critique of policing in the United States.

KRS-One is significant because of his body of work. His most familiar songs—Criminal Minded, Black Cop, and my personal favorite, Sound of da Police—are some of the earliest expressions of “conscious rap” during the early years of Hip Hop. KRS-One does something more than most of current Hip Hop: he actively, as part of his rap persona, seeks to teach history and philosophy through his lyrical styles, thereby justifying his self-proclamation as the Teacha and supporting his popular songs like You Must Learn and My Philosophy.

But it is his groundbreaking song, Sound of da Police, where KRS-One walks us through the first stage of Hip Hop’s critical musings on colorblindness and state power by issuing a powerful critique of the nature of Black alienation in a society experiencing change and challenge in the post-Civil Rights Era. Although much of the criticism of Hip Hop has centered largely on the violence present in its word—the racism, homophobia, misogyny, drug dealing, and financial irresponsibility—Sound of da Police claims no ownership. Rather, the song investigates the struggle of Black existentialism within a system of American criminal justice that



appropriates colorblindness as an interpretative strategy for understanding the disjointed character of Black double consciousness under American law. Using policing and Black existence as a backdrop, the song suggests how Black identity remains problematized and even fragmented by the law in the post-Civil Rights Era. KRS-One explains this in his first verse:

*Stand clear! Don man a-talk
You can't stand where I stand,
you can't walk where I walk.
Watch out! We run New York,
Police man come, we bust him out the park.
I know this for a fact, you don't like how I act
You claim I'm sellin' crack
But you be doin' that
I'd rather say "see ya"
Cause I would never be ya
Be a officer? You WICKED overseer!
Ya hotshot, wanna get props and be a saviour*

*First show a little respect, change your behavior
Change your attitude, change your plan
There could never really be
justice on stolen land
Are you really for peace and equality?
Or when my car is hooked up,*

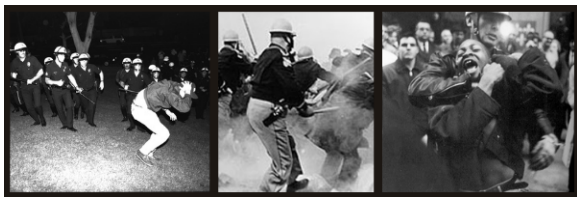


*you know you wanna follow me
Your laws are minimal
Cause you won't even think about
looking at the real criminal
This has got to cease
Cause we be getting HYPED
to the sound of da police!*

Using Hip Hop, KRS-One narrates how policing Black people is actually the cornerstone of anti-Blackness under American law. Although African Americans are, arguably, protected by the U.S. Constitution to the same degree as whites, KRS-One claims that those “laws are minimal,” meaning they fail to protect Black freedom from police oppression. According to KRS-One, this is possible because the police “won’t even think about looking at the real criminal,” by which he means the police themselves.

Worse, civil rights organizations, which were once the hallmark of Black liberation and freedom from legal oppression, are struggling to find modern ways of effectively managing police practices. The ability to sue police, departmentally and individually, has become so bootstrapped with legal protections that it is nearly impossible to prevail in a civil lawsuit challenging oppressive police practices.

Between departmental cover-ups, police protocol and training policies, and the creation of legal protections in the Good Faith Doctrine and Qualified Immunity, legal vindication against police violence is Sisyphean: an endless, unavailing labor or task. Further, post-Civil Rights juries continue to encourage bad police behavior through outright acquittals in criminal trials involving police brutality or reward the same through the reinstatement of rogue cops to their jobs, with the added insult of back pay. The conflation of Blackness and criminality is not limited to the perimeter of the urban core; rather, its pervasiveness stretches into nonBlack communities as well. In other



communities, the police have extended and the courts have endorsed the “out-of-place” practice of reasonable suspicion, which permits a police officer to find suspicious a person of one ethnicity in an area primarily populated by another. Thus, when Blacks enter white neighborhoods, their race becomes the outward indicator of potential criminal activity and justifies stopping, questioning, searching, and in some cases murdering them. Similarly, when whites enter the ghetto, the police either assume that they are engaged in criminal activity, typically as consumers of drugs or prostitution, or that they are lost or in need of help. The “out-of-place” practice of reasonable suspicion applied in both communities and random investigatory stops and street sweeps applied in Black ones indicates how race is often the sole factor in deciding which criminal suspects to detain.

The U.S. Supreme Courts’ widespread acceptance of race as probative of criminal activity and the steady erosion of the reasonable suspicion standard set by the judiciary’s racist interpretations of *Terry v. Ohio* produce one surety: poor, urban Blacks will always find themselves caught in the clutches of the penal system in numbers and with an intensity far disproportionate to their criminal

involvement. In this regard, the conflation of Blackness and crime, as collective representations of justice policy, remakes race and reactivates racism by re-legitimizing racism in American law and order.

In the post-Civil Rights Era, this current expression of anti-Black animus takes the form of public vituperation of young Black men as criminals and violent deviants. Here, modern policing draws on slave and Jim Crow paradigms for policing Black communities. This is what KRS-One means when he claims the police act as modern day overseers of state power vexed against Black freedom.

*Now here's a likkle truth,
Open up your eye
While you're checking out the boom-bap,
check the exercise
Take the word "overseer," like a sample
Repeat it very quickly in a crew for example
Overseer
Overseer
Overseer
Overseer
Officer, Officer, Officer, Officer!
Yeah, officer from overseer
You need a little clarity?
Check the similarity!
The overseer rode around the plantation
The officer is off paroling all the nation
The overseer could stop you what you're doing
The officer will pull you over
just when he's pursuing
The overseer had the right to get ill
And if you fought back,
the overseer had the right to kill*



*The officer has the right to arrest
And if you fight back they
put a hole in your chest!*

Unlike the first verse of Sound of da Police, KRS-One uses his second verse to ask for an explanation about police rather than make a statement about it. Specifically, he wants to

know why Blacks are policed more heavily than whites. Hefty resources are spent on overseeing the Black population in ways that place Blacks and the police at ideological odds: freedom vs. repression, survival vs. destruction. Perhaps KRS-One recognizes these ideological odds, analogizing plantation overseers to modern police overseers:

*(Woop!) They both ride horses
After 400 years, I've got no choices!
The police them have a little gun
So when I'm on the streets,
I walk around with a bigger one*

*(Woop-woop!) I hear it all day
Just so they can run the light
and be upon their way.*

KRS-One's reference to how the police "oversee" Black men is rooted in current policing's reaffirmation of the omnipotence of a legal Leviathan in the restricted domain of public order maintenance, symbolized by continuous battles against street delinquency. For example, Broken Windows styles of policing, which focuses on enforcing minor petty offenses such as jaywalking, loitering, or vagrancy, is used by the modern metropolis to address major political dysfunction within local communities. Instead, however, it only succeeds at encouraging anti-Black policing and prosecutions.

As a result, Hip Hop artists have replaced the political visionaries of the Black Power Era as the voices of resistance to, and freedom from, racial and political oppression deeply

embedded in American law. Recognizing the rise of Hip Hop, and rap music helps us clearly see how the stories of law and order shifted from the soapbox poets of Black Power to the street poets of Hip Hop. In this space, Hip Hop's shifting discourse on law takes a decidedly different form: where reading or listening to rap music reveals how the fallout of the war on crime and war on drugs exposes the deep connections between Black social existence and transformation within American law.

Fuck tha Police:
N.W.A's Stunning Denunciation
of American Policing

By andré douglas pond cummings



Scan QR Code to Watch
Fuck The Police by N.W.A.

Hip hop music and culture profoundly influences attitudes toward and perceptions about criminal justice in the United States. At base, hip hop lyrics and their cultural accoutrements turn U.S. punishment philosophy upon its head, effectively defeating the foundational purposes of American crime and punishment. Prison and punishment philosophy in the U.S. is based on clear principles of retribution and incapacitation, where prison time for crime should serve to deter individuals from engaging in criminal behavior. In addition, the stigma that attaches to imprisonment should dissuade criminals from recidivism.

Hip hop culture denounces crime and punishment in the United States in a way that essentially defies the underlying penal philosophy that has been adopted and championed by U.S. legislators for decades.

Since the inception of hip hop as a musical genre, hip hop artists have rhymed in a narrative format that starkly informs listeners and fans that the entire fundamental regime of prison for crime in the United States is suspect, illegitimate and profane. As U.S. criminal law and punishment is profane and illegitimate to many, as hip hop artists historically and fiercely argue, then two of the primary foundational underpinnings of the criminal justice system are lost on the hip hop generation, those of deterrence and stigma. "When . . . incarceration is not sufficiently stigmatized, it loses its value as deterrence."



Harsh critique of the the inequities in the criminal justice system and police brutality was on early display in N.W.A's 1989 track Fuck tha Police:

*Fuck the police comin'
straight from the underground;
A young n**** got it bad 'cause I'm brown;
I'm not the other color, So police think;
They have the authority to kill a minority;
Fuck that shit 'cause I ain't the one;
For a punk motherfucker
with a badge and a gun;
To be beaten on and thrown in jail;
We can go toe to toe in the middle of a cell;
Fuckin' with me 'cause I'm a teenager;
With a little bit of gold and a pager;
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product;
Thinkin' every n**** is sellin' narcotics;
You'd rather see me in the pen;
Than me and Lorenzo rollin' in a Benz-o;*

* * * *

*And on the other hand,
Without a gun, they can't get none;
But don't let it be a black and white one;
'Cause they'll slam ya down to the street top;
Black police showin' out for the white cop;
Ice Cube will swarm;
On any motherfucker in a blue uniform;*

*Just 'cause I'm from the CPT;
Punk police are afraid of me, huh;*

*A young n**** on the warpath;
And when I finish, it's gonna be a bloodbath;
Of cops dyin' in L.A.;
Yo, Dre, I got something to say.*

When N.W.A. released the furiously defiant "Fuck tha Police" in 1989, a generation of young people were instructed that law enforcement routinely targets minority youth expecting most to be involved in drug trafficking and that the criminal justice system often prefers that young African American youth be installed in jails and prisons, whether guilty of crime or not. At that time, the 1980s, this exposed notion of targeting, profiling and preferred imprisonment of inner-city youth for soft crime, and the clarion call for defiance in response to this unjust system, was audacious and stunning in its raw, stark realized exposé. And law enforcement, together with the traditional majority, reacted swiftly in an attempt to stifle and silence this critique. Notwithstanding this attempt to silence, beginning in the 1980s with Public Enemy, KRS One, N.W.A and Ice-T amongst many others, hip hop artists began describing in stark rhymes and narratives, a United States criminal justice system that is inequitable and unfair, a system that targets and profiles African American and inner-city youth, and those artists' descriptions became, in Chuck D's words "the Black CNN." These rap artists knew that they were informing a nation the Black CNN and were influencing and molding a generation. Hip hop's musical tradition is to be,



in many instances, black America's first response to current inequities and discriminations.

"Whether it's Katrina three years ago, the L.A. riots in 1992, Jesse Jackson's run in 1984, you know, hip-hop was seen as black America's first response." In 2004, Professor Paul Butler wrote "At the same time that an art form created by African American and Latino men dominates popular culture, African American and Latino men dominate American prisons.

Unsurprisingly then, justice—especially criminal justice—has been a preoccupation of the hip-hop nation. The culture contains a



strong descriptive and normative analysis of punishment by the people who know it best.”

Thus, a movement that was beginning to dominate a generation combined with artists that understood the potential dominance and that lived on the front lines of the crime and punishment system in the United States, came together in a perfect storm of platform, audience and defiance. The hip hop generation was going to learn, in no uncertain terms, about the inequities, injustices and discriminations in the U.S. criminal justice system. Hip hop exposes the current punishment regime as profoundly unfair. It demonstrates this view by, if not glorifying law breakers, at least not viewing all criminals with disgust which the law seeks to attach to them.

Hip-hop points out the incoherence of the law’s construct of crime, and it attacks the legitimacy of the system. Its message has the potential to transform justice in the United States. Thus, in

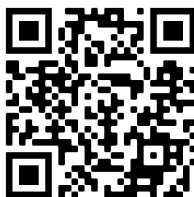
the 1980's and 1990's hip hop stars were describing, to their eager audiences (including millions of suburban white youth), the inequities in criminal law and punishment, including: (a) the specific targeting of inner city communities (revealed by the now well known huge prison population disparity (more than 50% of imprisoned men are African American, while only 13% of the total U.S. population is black)); (b) the egregiously unfair imprisonment of inner city crack dealers versus suburban cocaine dealers (revealed by the well known crack vs. cocaine sentencing disparity (prison time for a crack seller or taker was 100 times greater than prison time for a cocaine seller or taker – now it is simply 18 times greater)); (c) the American epidemic of police brutality inspired by the “siege mentality” that infests most large police forces (revealed by the well known brutalizations and killings of Rodney King, Abner Louima, Sean Bell, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and so many others), and (d) the flooding of urban communities with law enforcement officers, through the War on Drugs, while suburban crime and white collar crime continues seemingly unhindered and unabated.

In hearing and feeling these lessons dropped by hip hop educators, an entire hip hop nation learned and continues to learn a much different system of criminal justice than that what was taught to them in grade school, high school, college and graduate school, including law school. More than any other lesson learned from N.W.A and other hip hop pioneers, perhaps the most striking was that the entire

foundational principle of prison for crime in the United States is suspect, illegitimate and profane.

**Lockdown: Militarized Policing,
White Backlash,
and a National Uprising**

By Zachary Crow



Scan QR Code to Watch
Lockdown by Anderson .Paak

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin sparked a national uprising with expressions of solidarity across the globe. At the height of COVID-19, Black activists and their co-conspirators, understanding that the nation was battling two pandemics (coronavirus and white supremacy) abandoned the safety of their homes for the urgency of the streets.

Mass demonstrations calling for an end to police brutality, unfettered killings, and other forms of racial injustice, erupted in cities across the country, mobilizing veteran activists and budding protestors alike. Set against this backdrop comes Lockdown. In search of a “protest song that people could dance to,” Anderson .Paak marries his signature soul-rap sound with lyrics commemorating George Floyd and chronicling the protest and police violence that erupted in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and across the nation following the murder of George Floyd.

Black musicians have always scored the soundtrack for mass movements. From its outset, hip hop has sought to carry on this legacy of anthemizing the struggle for Black liberation. In an interview with the American Songwriter, Anderson .Paak acknowledges that the music he most admires from the ‘60s and ‘70s was “based around protest, around the revolution that was happening, and around social issues,” and seeks to inhabit this long lineage with his track Lockdown.

*You should've been downtown (Word)
The people are risin' (For real?)*



*We thought it was a lockdown (What?)
They opened the fire (Man)
Them bullets was flyin' (Ooh)
Who said it was a Lockdown? Goddamn lie.
Oh my
Time heals all, but you out of time now (Now)
Judge gotta watch us
from the clock tower (True)
from the clock tower (True)
Lil' tear gas cleared the whole place out
I'll be back with the hazmat for the next round.
We was tryna protest, then the fires broke out
Look out for the secret agents,
they be planted in the crowd*

In the summer of 2020, national protest reached heights unseen since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Activists came face to face with a militarized police presence that labeled them terrorists and treated them as combatants. By June 2, 2020 (just eight days after the murder of George Floyd) the National Guard had been activated in at least twenty-eight states. Infiltration, mass arrests, rubber bullets, tear gas, flash grenades, and other military-grade weapons, were immediate and served as ways of criminalizing and stifling free speech. The music video for the Anderson .Paak track Lockdown visualizes these realities. .Paak and friends can be seen recuperating after what appears to be a bloody



confrontation with law enforcement.

These realities are not new. Since its inception in 1996, the Defense Department's 1033 program has transferred more than \$7.4 billion worth of military equipment—including grenade launchers, batons, combat vehicles, and hundreds of thousands of rifles—to police and sheriff's departments. In addition to possessing an unprecedented arsenal, law enforcement officers are imbued with a "warrior" mindset and trained to enact deadly force without hesitation. A 2016 study into police training revealed that officers receive 168 hours of firearms training, self-defense, and use of force while only receiving nine hours of

conflict management training. As a result, American police officers are trained to kill, rather than trained to resolve conflicts.

In addition to its unapologetic critique of police, Lockdown exposes a white citizenry that would scoff at looting while turning a blind eye toward the killing of Black Americans.

Politicians, elected officials, media, and members of the public attempted to depict the uprising as “civil unrest.” In response to police violence, some peaceful protesters escalated their tactics, engaging in acts of property damage and destruction. Mainstream critiques of rioters and looters were intended to delegitimize the movement and paint protestors—rather than homicidal policing and other forms of white supremacy—as the true problem. Donald Trump called demonstrators “thugs,” threatened them with “vicious dogs” and tweeted a quote popularized in 1967 by Miami police chief Walter Headley: “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.”

Whether it be the erection of confederate monuments in response to Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement or the dramatic shift from Barack Obama to Donald Trump, white backlash has always followed the advancement of racial equality. Despite recent studies from the *New York Times* which show, that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained more support in the summer of 2020 than the previous two years combined. This surge in approval was short-lived. White opposition remains widespread. Over the past year, support for BLM has fallen to rates lower than before



George Floyd's death. As is the common practice in seasons of Black resistance, protest in 2020 was met with white denial, apathy, and self-victimization.

Anderson .Paak articulates it this way:

*Said, "It's civil unrest," but you sleep so sound
Like you don't hear the screams
when we catchin' beatdowns?
Stayin' quiet when they killin' n*****,
but you speak loud
When we riot, got opinions
comin' from a place of privilege
Sicker than the COVID
how they did him on the ground*

*Speakin' of the COVID, is it still goin' around?
And won't you tell me 'bout the lootin'?
What's that really all about?
'Cause they throw away black lives
like paper towels*

More than a year after the murder of George Floyd, a national reckoning on race and policing has yet to be fully realized. Lockdown reveals a harsh reality in which Black Americans are still treated as disposable (like paper towels). Not only are they criminalized, abused, and killed by police, but also maligned in public opinion. Despite personal epiphanies



among some white Americans over the past year, most have failed to connect this watershed moment to systemic injustice and take appropriate action. A philosophy of “bad apples,” rather than one rooted in an understanding of white supremacy, allows the system to persist. Bad apples grow on rotten trees. Anderson .Paak invites listeners to an ongoing revolution intended to dismantle a system of injustice that dates back to slavery. Listen. Answer the call.

Oodles O' Noodles Babies: Meek
Mill's Lyrical Exploration of Trauma
Inflicted by American Policing

By Caleb Gregory Conrad



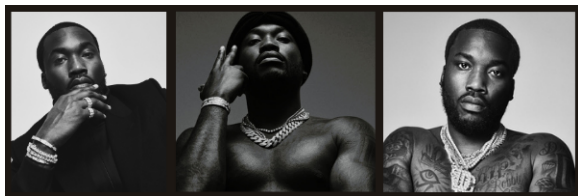
Scan QR Code to Watch
Oodles O' Noodles Babies by Meek Mill

In the way of the unapologetic and unfiltered artists that shaped the rhythmic, lyrical, and cultural impact of hip-hop in the genre's inception and early era, Meek Mill's music features deeply personal and emotional themes derived from the rapper's own lived experiences. Employing infectious beats and catchy hooks, Meek has followed hip-hop's tradition of pushing topics considered taboo into the mainstream conscience, as his hit tracks describe in striking detail his own childhood trauma, his battle with personal demons, and his experience as a victim of police misconduct and brutality.

Meek Mill does not hide the fact that his life and career have been punctuated by trauma, from his childhood lived on the streets of Philadelphia's projects through his rise to fame and his arrival as one of hip hop's household names. Just listen to his music. In his ever-expanding and evolving catalog, through tracks like *Trauma*, *Otherside of America*, *Stay Woke*, and *Oodles O'Noodles Babies*, Meek describes the deeply traumatic experiences that shaped his life, including his decade-long and ongoing saga with the American criminal justice system.

Meek's story is unfortunately not an anomaly; instead, it's one that mirrors the same realities and traumas that impact the daily lives of countless similarly situated young Black people in the United States.

Meek Mill was raised in an area of Philadelphia where poverty, addiction, and violence were not just factors on the environment—they made up the environment. These pervasive traumas,



along with the threat of catching a bullet—from a gang member or police officer alike—lurked around every corner. Meek has seen countless neighbors and family members be taken from the neighborhood in shackles and locked away from their loved ones and their lives. He raps about this cycle in *Oodles O’Noodles Babies*:

*Lot of daddies goin’ back and forth out of jail
Lots of sons growin’ up and repeating it
This the belly of the beast, you won’t make it out
Man, this shit was designed just to eat us up*

Meek has seen friends and family gunned down and killed in the street by violence that was random, gang-related, or prompted by police:

*Killed my lil’ cousin, I’m like, “Damn it, man”
Had to see the footage on the camera, man
On the pavement, with his brains out
With the white sheet, he was laid out*

Meek has seen his own family unit upended due to criminality, addiction, and death. And, as a young man—at just 19 years of age—he was needlessly beaten by corrupt police, arrested and incarcerated, and ultimately convicted of crimes that he did not commit, becoming another statistic as a young Black man swallowed by the American criminal justice

system. In *Oodles O'Noodles Babies*, Meek carefully extrapolates the ways that American policing and the criminal justice system literally traumatized and endangered his young Black life.

*I think it's funny how
We used to go to school, play SEGA's
And then, next thing you know,
you runnin' round with Glock .40s*

*We ain't never believed in the police,
they was shootin' us*

*Yeah, they called it the projects,
they put us in projects;
What they gon' do with us? Can't call the cops yet;
You might just get popped at;
'Cause they the ones shootin' us;
I'm on my mom's steps, it's like a bomb threat;
The violence pursuing us...*

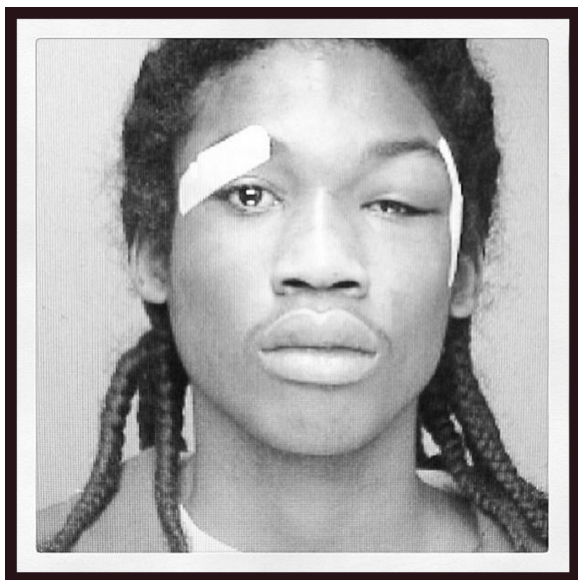
Meek Mill's experience with police brutality and misconduct began on January 24, 2007, when he was arrested by the city's Narcotics Field Unit ("NFU") on suspicion for selling crack cocaine. The arrest warrant that would kick-start the rapper's now infamous battle for his freedom was issued based on a single statement from NFU supervising officer Reggie Graham, who stated that he witnessed Meek Mill leave his residence, sell crack cocaine, and return to his home.

When the NFU showed up to exercise the warrant, Meek ended up beaten and bloody

and charged with several crimes, including pointing a gun at Graham and his fellow officers. At Meek's trial, Officer Graham appeared as the lone witness for the prosecution, and it would be Graham's testimony alone that would convince the judge to convict and sentence the rapper.

However, we all know now what Meek Mill knew then: Officer Graham was not telling the truth. In fact, since the time that he testified at Meek's trial, Officer Graham has been discharged and blacklisted from testifying by the Philadelphia District Attorney due to his long history of dishonesty and corruption. Graham's NFU was found to be so corrupt that thousands of cases involving the unit have been thrown out. NFU officers were said to have lied to show probable cause, obtain warrants, bust through the doors of suspected drug suppliers, and steal all of the drugs and cash they could find on a scene. Meek's case was no different, as it is now clear that Officer Graham lied about witnessing Meek selling drugs to obtain the arrest warrant. On the exact date and at the precise time that Graham claimed that he witnessed Meek selling contraband, the rapper was in court supporting a cousin who had to appear there. Officer Graham also lied on the stand at trial when he told the judge that Meek had pointed a gun at officers.

According to a former NFU officer on the scene the night of Meek's beating and arrest, Meek never raised a weapon toward the officers; instead, he removed the firearm from his waistband and laid it on the ground before placing his hands in the air. This statement



corroborates Meek's story from the very beginning that he had never pointed the weapon in the direction of the officers. Meek has since stated that if he ever pointed a firearm at police, he would surely be dead. With the unprecedented murders of young, unarmed Black men by American police, this logic from Meek cannot be argued with.

Meek Mill's songs, like *Oodles O'Noodles Babies*, are now blasted from speakers, cars, and headphones all around the globe, casting the rapper's reality of childhood environmental trauma, police brutality, and a rigged criminal justice system to a worldwide audience. Meek's story of how the corrupt system of American policing traumatized him and impacted his life



is a powerful story, as he is one of only a few to have reached success in the face of such adversity. How we take Meek's story, and what we do to rectify similar harms, is in our hands.

We Gon' Be Alright

By Todd J. Clark



Scan QR Code to Watch
Alright by Kendrick Lamar

Negro spirituals were a motivating and unifying force in inspiring black slaves to fight against the evils of slavery. Derived from African melodies and Christian hymns, negro spirituals provided slaves with an oral mechanism for highlighting the struggle, brutality, sorrow and pain of slavery. Instead of merely highlighting the negative circumstance of slavery, negro spirituals focused on perpetuating a message of survival and that faith in God would overcome their circumstances. At their core, negro spirituals reaffirmed the resiliency of black people and through faith, that they would be “alright.”

Approximately, two hundred years later, the times have changed, but the importance of a similar message in the black community is the same. It was once the white slave masters that obviated the need for negro spirituals, today, a similar message is needed to remind blacks that we shall also prevail against police brutality and a criminal justice system that disproportionately incarcerates and arrests blacks. Hip hop music now occupies the same space that negro spirituals once held and the importance of hip hop music has been obviated through the energy it has generated in fueling the Black Lives Matter (“BLM”) Movement and its efforts to reform America’s criminal justice system.

We Gon’ Be Alright!

Much like the old negro spirituals, Lamar’s song entitled “Alright,” from his critically acclaimed album, “To Pimp A Butterfly,” has served as a catalyzing force in continuing to reaffirm that



better days are ahead and more importantly, that police brutality must end.

“Four hundred years ago, as slaves, we prayed and sung joyful songs to keep our heads level-headed with what was going on” “Four hundred years later, we still need that music to heal. And I think that 'Alright' is definitely one of those records that makes you feel good no matter what the times are.”

According to Miles Marshall Lewis, author of the book *Promise That You Will Sing About Me: The Power and Poetry of Kendrick Lamar*, Kendrick Lamar was inspired to write "Alright" during a trip he took to South Africa after visiting Robben Island, the location where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. According to Kendrick, his visit to Africa reminded him about the history of chattel slavery in America. While Kendrick never anticipated the impact that "Alright" would have in motivating a movement for black equality, he knew that the impetus for the song was rooted in a history of resilience. A history that reaffirms that blacks will be "alright" through their fight and faith.

*Alls my life I has to fight, n*****
Alls my life I
Hard times like, yah!



*Bad trips like, yah!
Nazareth, I'm fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But if God got us then we gon' be alright*

According to most activists, the power of the song “Alright” was first appreciated during the summer of 2015, when black activists and organizers from across the country gathered on the campus of Cleveland State University for a three day conference called the “Movement for Black Lives” to discuss best practices and to develop a future plan to combat a criminal justice system that unfairly punishes blacks. During one of the conference breaks, someone played “Alright” and the entire auditorium erupted chanting “We Gon’ Be Alright!” It was at the moment that “Alright” assumed its status as an anthem for the BLM Movement.

But at the same time “Alright” was inspiring a peaceful movement for criminal justice reform, Republican legislators were mobilizing against the movement through two concerted efforts. First, these legislators operated to enact legislation to stifle the movement by criminalizing protest activity. According to the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, at the apex of this past summer’s BLM Movement, eight states passed laws cracking down on protest activity while at least 21 other states have similar bills pending. Despite these efforts, the Black Lives Matter movement will be “Alright” and will continue to inspire change and promote equality.

This is so because the song “Alright” as well as the BLM Movement are not about creating anarchy, but instead ensuring an equal application of the law. Carrie Boyd, policy counsel for the Southern Poverty Law Center Action Fund echoed this sentiment and expressed concern about these bills and the high probability that they will be applied and enforced discriminately. “We know from existing data on arrests and convictions, [that] folks in the Black community, in particular, are over-incarcerated and overcharged.” In specifically referencing one such bill that was passed in Florida she stated that “This bill, in our minds, is deliberately broad to cast a wide net and, frankly, to round up folks.”

The second effort against the BLM movement occurred as a blatant attack on teaching critical race theory (“CRT”). After realizing the success and impact of the BLM movement as a means of forcing institutional change and accountability,

Republican leaders acted swiftly to tamp it down. Specifically, Republican legislators in at least 28 states proposed legislation that would ban teaching CRT in educational settings. Interestingly, many of the legislators that support such legislation have no idea what CRT means or encompasses. For example, Alabama State Representative, Chris Pringle, ignorantly and incorrectly told Alabama Media Group columnist Kyle Whitmire that CRT “teaches that certain children are inherently bad people because of the color of their skin, period.” This is NOT what CRT teaches. Instead, CRT challenges people to think critically about why racial stratification exists in America and forces a practical discussion about the reality that white privilege continues to provide a set of invisible benefits to white people that everyone else can observe yet, the beneficiaries of this privilege cannot.

As further evidence of his ignorance, Pringle also claimed that people who didn’t “buy into” critical race theory are being sent to government “reeducation camps.” When Whitmire asked for evidence, Pringle cited an unspecified report he read and remarked that it did not “say who it was, it just says a government that held these — these training sessions” then claimed he couldn’t find the link.

We also see the same attack at the federal level. More recently, senators Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) and Mike Braun (R-Ind.) introduced “The Protect Equality and Civics Education Act,” which seeks to ban federal funding for teaching CRT.



In support of the legislation, Senator Rubio specifically remarked that “The story of our nation is under attack as the radical left continues to attempt to rewrite American history and categorize our citizens into an oppressor and oppressed class.”

While CRT has been around for decades, and for the majority of its history was largely dismissed by white scholars and politicians, its role in successfully inspiring the ethos of the BLM Movement at reminding its leaders that discrimination is deeply rooted in America has placed it under attack. Racism is no longer as overt as it was in the past and as a result, we need to think deeper and more critically about its continued impact. CRT provides the necessary framework to help deconstruct it.

At its core, legislation against CRT, especially given the current success of the BLM movement, is a direct effort to deprive people of the ability to see that many aspects of America’s racist past still remain in both our criminal justice and economic systems.

The frustration from some Republican representatives is that CRT posits that many of their success are due to white privilege and not their own work ethic. The fact that CRT has now



moved main stream is proof that its message is viable, accurate, true and more importantly, that "We Gon' Be Alright!"

*Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
N****, when our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
N*gga, and we hate po-po*

*Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
N****, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright*

In light of these efforts, "We Gon' Be Alright"

BECAUSE:

- ▶ There are a cadre of professors, like the contributors to this Bag of Snakes forum, who have been inspired by the BLM movement and CRT to continue to fight.
- ▶ There are students and activists that will continue to mobilize the message of change.
- ▶ There are enough people that are tired of the privilege that exists in America.
- ▶ And more importantly, there is a faith in GOD that “We Gon’ Be ALRIGHT!!!

From Protest to Policy:
Killer Mike Looks Beyond Outrage
to Get Black Community to Engage

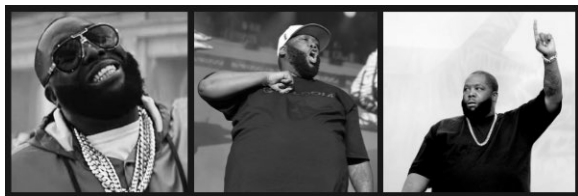
By Kwami Abdul-Bey



Scan QR codes to Watch
Close Your Eyes (And Count to Fuck)
and Walking in the Snow
by Run the Jewels

On May 29, 2020, during the now infamous press conference held by Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, former Dungeon Family member Killer Mike, stood up in tears to speak about how he felt after watching the video of George Floyd being murdered just a few days earlier. He said: “I’m mad as hell. I woke up wanting to see the world burn yesterday, because I’m tired of seeing black men die. He casually put his knee on a human being’s neck for nine minutes as he died like a zebra in the clutch of a lion’s jaw. So that’s why children are burning it to the ground. They don’t know what else to do. And it is the responsibility of us to make this better right now. We don’t want to see one officer charged, we want to see four officers prosecuted and sentenced. We don’t want to see Targets burning, we want to see the system that is set up for systemic racism burnt to the ground.”

Since that day, Killer Mike has been a consummate ghetto philosopher imploring young people—particularly Black and Brown youth—to intelligently channel their frustrated energies in response to the police brutality, repression, and criminalization of a generation that Black and Brown communities have continued to suffer in America. Despite a global pandemic that should have, at minimum, significantly slowed down the machine that wages war against us continuously, this oppression persists. An example of the humanity that weighs Killer Mike down in moments such as these can be found in a recent *Rolling Stone* magazine article when he revealed what is really at stake for him: “I have a 20-year-old son, and I have a 12-year-old son,



and I'm so afraid for them. ... This is about a war machine. It is us against the fucking machine!" And this statement is the glue that binds his real life to his artistry. As a member of the supergroup Run The Jewels, in 2014, Killer Mike teamed up with Rage Against the Machine frontman Zack de la Rocha to pen his insightful, lyrical vision of where we may be headed in the song "Close Your Eyes (And Count to Fuck)":

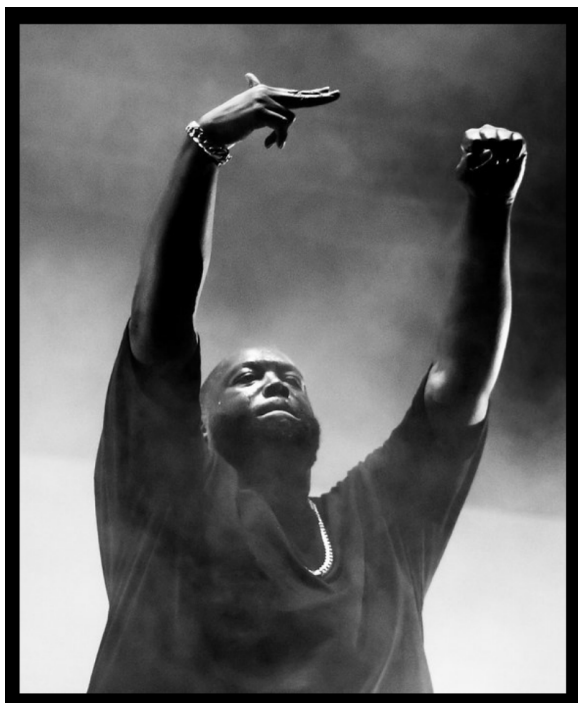
*How you like my stylin', bruh?
Ain't nobody stylin', bruh
'Bout to turn this mothafucka up
like Riker's Island, bruh
Where my thuggers and my cripples
and my bloodles and my brothers?
When you n****s gon' unite
and kill the police, mothafuckas?*

*Or take over a jail, give those COs hell
The burnin' of the sulfur,
God damn I love the smell
Like it's a pillow torchin',
where the fuck the warden?
And when you find him, we don't kill him,
we just waterboard him
We killin' 'em for freedom
'cause they tortured us for boredom
And even if some good ones die, fuck it,
the Lord'll sort 'em*

In October 2020, Killer Mike headlined the three-day virtual youth conference sponsored by Sean Combs' REVOLT.tv, encouraging both the panelists and the participants—both Democrats and Republicans—to stop “fighting over who has the best master,” and instead jointly begin reading, and listening to, Thomas Sowell, Walter E. Williams, Antonio Moore, Yvette Carnell, the Hon. Elijah Muhammad, the Hon. Marcus Garvey, and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) so that Black and Brown communities can eventually return to the independent glory of what he calls "the only historical time period when America actually was great": the Reconstruction Era which witnessed the most concentrated, and widespread levels of Black community resilience and prosperity.

As the son of a former Atlanta, GA, police officer, and the cousin and friend of nearly a dozen current police officers throughout DeKalb and Fulton counties, Killer Mike carries a unique perspective on police misconduct and excessive use of force. He has discussed in multiple interviews over the last couple of years how his father specifically guided him and his brother away from following in his father's footsteps due to the corruption inherent within the police force. And, while Killer Mike listened to his father in this instance, he still holds a healthy respect for the men and women in blue.

At the same time, he is not afraid to speak the truth about how American police departments have been unnecessarily militarized, turning them into occupying forces with no true accountability. He does not believe that any



TRUE accountability will ever come from within the law enforcement industry. Instead, he urges Black America to immediately begin “plotting,

planning, strategizing, organizing, and mobilizing,” in a way that will create an opportunity for each of us to individually “kill [our] masters,” in the tradition of Boots Riley’s “Kill Your Landlord.” Killer Mike says that once we do this, we will have the independent power that is necessary to create a public policy platform that will enable us to end qualified immunity, the secret power that police



departments and unions hold sacred and close in order to continually brutalize and terrorize our communities with impunity.

If we do not do this, Killer Mike believes that our apathy will be the fuel that keeps police brutality going and going like the Energizer Bunny long into the foreseeable future. His latest Run The Jewels song “Walking in the Snow,” which was released earlier this year, speaks directly to this:

*The way I see it, you're probably freest
from the ages one to four
Around the age of five you're shipped away
for your body to be stored
They promise education,
but really they give you tests and scores
And they predictin' prison population*



*by who scoring the lowest
And usually the lowest scores the poorest and
they look like me*

*And every day on the evening news,
they feed you fear for free
And you so numb,
you watch the cops choke out a man like me
Until my voice goes from a shriek to whisper,
"I can't breathe"
And you sit there in the house on couch
and watch it on TV*

*The most you give's a Twitter rant
and call it a tragedy
But truly the travesty,
you've been robbed of your empathy
Replaced it with apathy,
I wish I could magically
Fast forward the future so then you can face it
And see how fucked up
it'll be I promise I'm honest
They coming for you the day after
they comin' for me*

In the sixth episode of his 2019 Netflix documentary series "Trigger Warning with Killer Mike," he actually demonstrates the practical way to do this by acquiring large plots of rural land and joining forces to grow food,

engage in commerce amongst each other, and conduct self-defense training with various weapons.

Some have discounted Killer Mike as not genuinely radical because he does not explicitly advocate for the defunding and abolition of the law enforcement industry. It is argued that he instead espouses the rhetoric of there being both good cops and bad cops and it is the “bad apples” that we must strategically target. I see a complicated man with a complicated back story addressing a complicated problem in a complicated manner. I also come from a family with current and former cops. And, we all have our enhanced concealed carry permits and are doing our own preparations for that day. At the same time, I am writing legislation and engaging with the machine to do everything that I can to minimize its destructive impact on my community. So, I get where Killer Mike is coming from on all levels. His words and actions are not to be discounted, as they are part of the bigger picture.



Police Have Never Protected or
Served Black Americans:
Will They Ever?

By Zoë Harris

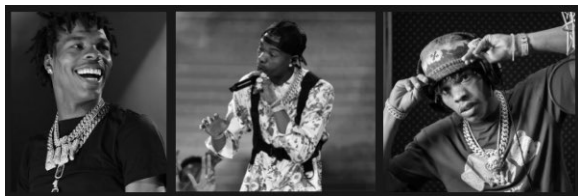


Scan QR codes to Watch
The Bigger Picture by Lil Baby

George Floyd was a father. He was a son. He was a provider. He was also a man who was arrested and pinned down to the ground with a knee to his neck for NINE MINUTES and TWENTY-NINE SECONDS. He was senselessly murdered at the hands of a white man with a badge. It was not only senseless, but it was callous, monstrous, and inhumane. What happened to George Floyd is a tragedy. His name will forever ring through the ears of America. But George Floyd's name isn't the first to make headlines as a result of police brutality, and unfortunately, it is unlikely to be the last.

In "The Bigger Picture," Lil Baby recognizes the tragedy of George Floyd, and he also recognizes that police murder is a much greater problem, and the roots are much deeper than this one tragedy. While Lil Baby released "The Bigger Picture" shortly after the death of George Floyd, his message focuses more on recognizing that the harm stems from much deeper roots than just another black man killed at the hands of a white cop.

He stated in an interview with *The Beat with Ari Melber* that "in the time of uproar in the situation, I took it upon myself to speak upon the whole thing. I didn't just . . . make a George Floyd song. I mentioned . . . what kinda happened in the song a lil' bit, but it was like a whole thing. It wasn't just like that incident because it is way bigger than that incident." Lil Baby grew up around this very thing since he was a kid. According to his interview, Lil Baby witnessed his first murder in middle school. One of his closest friends was shot in the



back by the police. He was in middle school. He was a child. He was a child watching another child be shot and killed by the men who were supposed to be there to protect them. Instead, the men in blue preyed on the little black boys. Because of this, Lil Baby and other similarly situated little brown and black boys grew up resenting the men in blue and seeing them only as the modern-day oppressor.

Lil Baby's most intuitive message in "The Bigger Picture" is that there is a systematic injustice in policing that has developed over hundreds of years that must first be addressed in an effort to most effectively remedy it.

*It's bigger than black and white.
It's a problem with the whole way of life
It can't change overnight
But we gotta start somewhere
Might as well go ahead and start here
We done had a hell of a year
I'ma make it count while I'm here.
God is the only man I fear.*

The greater harm, and perhaps the most sickening, is that Lil Baby is speaking on the same type of infectious harm N.W.A spat about over thirty years ago and Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about over 30 years before that. Instead of things getting better, police

misconduct and brutality only becomes more normalized. It no longer is a surprise to see another black face headlining national news in relation to a police shooting. Instead, it is now expected. The reactions of those watching those same headlines have become in some corners callous and indifferent. This is because brutality has become the new norm. So much so that artists, like Lil Baby, use their voice and their platform in an attempt to de-normalize the conception that it is okay for an officer to abuse and misuse his discretion at the expense of another man's life.

A fun fact about Lil Baby is that he does not write his songs prior to recording them. He stated in his interview "it just come from my head, from my soul for real. When I try to write something, I don't get the same deliverance from when I just go into the studio and rap. I really just rap about everyday life and about what's going on." Every lyric and every verse, spat by Lil Baby in *The Bigger Picture* came directly from the heart and experience. It took no sweat for Lil Baby to write this double-platinum song because this double-platinum song is his life. In this song, Lil Baby is verbalizing a lifetime of firsthand knowledge of personal police misconduct and abuse he has not only witnessed but been the victim of.

*I see blue lights, I get scared and start runnin'
That shit be crazy, they 'posed to protect us
Throw us in handcuffs and arrest us
While they go home at night,
that shit messed up
Knowing we needed help, they neglect us*



Wondering who gon' make them respect us

The world we live in now is not much different than it was a hundred years ago as it pertains to the systematically oppressive Injustice system. The only difference between now and then is the modern turning point in political acuteness. From the perspective of most men of color, just

because they may no longer call the white man “master” does not change the oppressive way in which the system is predicated and has continued to function. The manner in which it is delivered is not as important as what is delivered. Said differently, men in blue are presented by our nation to protect and serve its people. It could be argued that under the uniform lies only false promises and false hope.

In his book “The Condemnation of Blackness,” historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad speaks on the parallels of modern-day policing and police practices 400 hundred years ago. Policing originated as a form of controlling slaves. They were known as slave patrols. Almost all white men were required to serve on these patrols. These men were instructed by statute to “arrest any slave or slaves, whether with or without a permit, who may be caught in the woods or forest with any fire or torch which slave or slaves thus arrested shall be subject to corporal punishment, not exceeding thirty stripes across the back.”

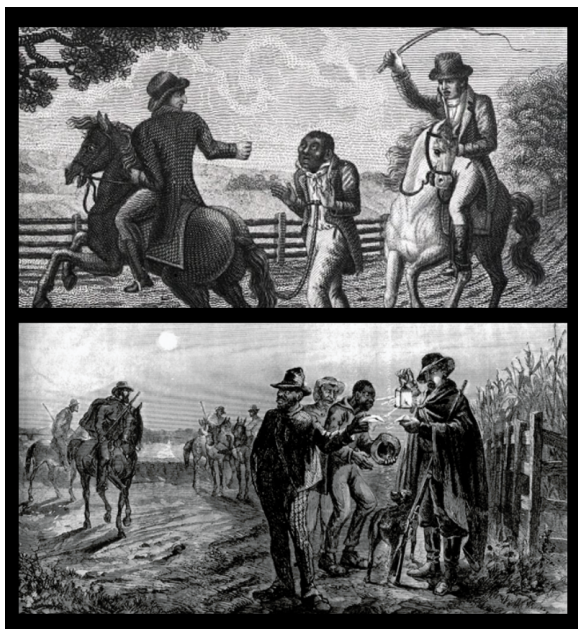
During the time of slave patrols, police would arrest a black man for whatever reason the white man gave. Not only were white mobs allowed to antagonize their black peers without any objection from police, but they also had the power to dictate when and why a black man may be arrested. Policing the racial norms of white supremacy began hundreds of years ago and still continues to this day. The color of a mans skin was equated to criminalization 400 years ago and it still is today. In his book, Muhammad states that pointing out the problem

is clearly not sufficient to fix the system.

“The problem has been known for a century. The evidence has been presented for a century. The recommendation for change, for holding police officers accountable, for charging them with a criminal offense when they behave criminally. It is a century of the same story playing out over and over again.” Muhammad does not believe that any additional acknowledgment or recognition of the problem is necessary, but that instead, the focus should be on recognizing that “police officers and police agencies are incapable of fixing themselves.”

And because of this, Muhammad presents what seems to be a question that aligns with what Lil Baby addresses in “The Bigger Picture”: “Do white people in America still want the police to protect their interest over the rights and dignity and lives of black, brown, Asian and indigenous populations around this country?” Until that question is answered, there will, unfortunately, be many more faces in the headlines that look like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and the countless other beautiful black souls egregiously taken from us at the hands of another white policeman. Until this Nation addresses “The Bigger Picture,” there is no hope.

*I can't lie like I don't rap about killing and dope
But I'm telling my youngins to vote
I did what I did 'cause I
didn't have no choice or no hope
I was forced to just jump in and go*



*This bullshit is all that we know,
but it's time for a change
Got time to be serious, no time for no games
We ain't takin' no more,
let us go from them chains
God bless they souls, every one of them names*

