Resistance Through Rhythm: Political Wokeness and its Contentious Relationship With Black-American Protest Music

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INTRODUCTION

The interaction between ignorance and culture can manifest itself in many different ways, simultaneously advancing and hindering broader society. However, one must recognize how ignorance enables systems limiting the expression of historically oppressed communities. For example, within the United States, the term ‘woke’ has undergone a troubling transformation over the past decade, influenced by two distinct groups. On one hand, there is a silent white majority that perceives itself as neutral and non-racist, yet actively participates in perpetuating the appropriation and distortion of language rooted in Black resistance. This complicity further reinforces the framework that upholds systemic violence against people of color. On the other hand, there is a more conservative, extreme group, though not a majority, who deliberately engage in racially motivated appropriation. They manipulate and distort narratives to create a simplistic and digestible story about the Black community that the silent majority readily accepts, ultimately serving to further uphold and protect white supremacy.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these groups, and mostly the silent majority, are just aspects of the broader structure that this paper seeks to respond to and challenge. These opponents of ‘wokeness’ have misrepresented the voices and stories of marginalized Americans by actively appropriating a term once used to unify and uplift communities, and replacing it with a diminished definition utilized to assassinate the integrity of individuals aware of their own social inequality and marginalization. The term ‘political wokeness’ has been stolen, now serving as an excuse for deliberate ignorance towards police violence with fatal consequences. And while understanding how this history of policing continues to inform the lives of

Black-Americans and other marginalized groups is an important first step, it will not be the focal goal of this paper.

Drawing on contemporary evidence, this analysis will focus on the resistance efforts to combat the appropriation of political wokeness. Rather than focus on the negative realities of police violence, this work points towards a new direction regarding the conflicts between free speech and Black-American resistance music. This paper aims to amplify the voices of victims of police violence, by officers sworn, under oath, to 'serve' and 'protect' them. By examining the intersectional role gender and race plays in musical resistance efforts by Kendrick Lamar in "Alright", this song will demonstrate how Black-American protest music has served as an effective means of addressing the contentious nature of free speech politics in the United States, specifically as seen with political wokeness.

THE REALITY OF POLICE VIOLENCE

Alteria Woods, India Kager, and DeCynthia Clements. What do these names have in common? Are they names whose realities you are familiar with when you read them? With both questions posed, it is uncoincidental that most people are unable to answer them.

Aside from their shared intersectionality as Black women in the United States, these individuals also share an unfortunate fate as three of the approximately 250 women fatally shot by United States police officers since 2015 (Lati, Jenkins, Brugal, 2020). With frequencies of police violence exponentially increasing since then, we must say their names, and we must demand change.

Why, you may ask? Because American law enforcement is not held accountable. Because, Black women like Woods, Kager, Clements, and an increasing number of the American

public lose their lives to the police, never getting back home to their families at the end of the night. Because, the alarming number of violent encounters with law enforcement plagues U.S. society, continues to be ignored, is ineffectively addressed, and thus creates problematic realities for all. These questions are difficult yet absolutely necessary, directly challenging the 'American Dream' and the promises of equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness enshrined to white Americans nearly two centuries ago by the U.S. Constitution. Moreover, The Constitution is riddled with contradictions and controversial exclusion of marginalized peoples that encourages selective ideals and impacts modern American life immensely. A perfect example is demonstrated by the First and Fourteenth Amendment. Rights codified by the Fourteenth Amendment have conflicted historically with the contradictory values of the First Amendment.[1] But, there is one issue regarding the politics of free speech that is especially problematic in American culture and prevents progressive, real change from happening: the growing appropriation of 'political wokeness', an ambiguous term commonly misused by the silent majority to invalidate resistance efforts against government sanctioned violence.

Americans are socialized to find solace in their ignorance, and whether society recognizes it or not, police violence is happening in America. Contemporary evidence of this violence is further supported by historical evidence, with the earliest formal slave patrol systems established in the Carolinas during the early Sixteenth Century. This policing system was not about enforcing the law or upholding what was right, but rather to "establish a system of terror and squash slave uprisings with the capacity to pursue, apprehend, and return runaway slaves to

[1] "Fourteenth Amendment equality, for its part, has grown as if equality could be achieved while the First Amendment protected the speech of inequality, meaning whenever inequality takes an expressive form, and without considering equal access to speech as central to any equality agenda" (McKinnon, 1993).

their owners. Tactics included the use of excessive force to control and produce desired slave behavior" (NAACP, 2021). American slave patrols easily demonstrate how incidents of police brutality are not accidental, but rather the direct product of an illicit system of oppression inherently relying on the abuse and exploitation of marginalized peoples. Police violence can not be justified by just 'bad apples' in the bunch. The argument exemplifies yet another justification for white supremacy embedded within the very foundations of American culture. Moreover, despite promises of equality for all, the social hierarchy is rooted in a dangerous and extreme form of racial superiority, and continues to flourish. This reality of systemic inequality poses a dangerous threat to all Americans, but particularly for those whose identity makes them more vulnerable to negative police encounters.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

First, it is critical to understand the significant role intersectionality plays in daily lived experiences. For intersectional communities, their reality means acknowledging, validating, and accepting the differences which inform their identity. From gender or race, to sexuality, and even socioeconomic status, identity dictates all aspects of lived experiences, including one's belief systems. And yet for Black-Americans, their experiences within the last decade have been associated with a dramatic and disproportionate rise in encounters with police brutality. While brutality serves an an extreme form of police violence, for the purposes of this research, police violence and brutality will be utilized synonymously, and be defined by Britanicia as the "unwarranted or excessive and often illegal use of force against civilians by U.S. police officers" (Moore, 2023).

Furthermore, according to data published by *The Lancet* on a 1980 to 2018 study examining underreported police violence, researchers found that "the highest under-reporting in the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) occurred for deaths of Black Americans." Moreover, American law enforcement "disproportionately killed Black people at a rate of 3.5 times higher than White people… [and] killed Hispanic and Indigenous people disproportionately as well" (GBD 2019 Police Violence US Subnational Collaborators, 2021). This historical trend of government sanctioned violence is not just numbers or statistics, but confirmation of the very realities that the silent majority actively denies and overtly ignores. The silent majority intentionally engages in a form of expression that is incredibly harmful to the inclusion and belonging of other marginalized identities. With the American government protecting the free speech of the silent majority, one must ask if the free exchange of ideas is more important, more fair, than the truth? The ongoing realities for marginalized communities would argue otherwise due to growing normalization of anti-Blackness in U.S. society. For example, for every one million Americans being killed due to police violence, it translates to 69 Black-Americans lives that are lost. Generally meaning that Black-Americans are "2.9 times more likely to be killed by police than white-Americans" (Mapping Police Violence, 2013). Data like police violence in America is devastating, especially when one conceptualizes how aspects of one's identity, like race, greatly informs susceptibility to social issues like violent encounters with law enforcement. For Black women like Alteria, India, and DeCynthia, the double jeopardy of their gender and race informed how police officers perceived them, without even knowing them. These women are more than another shameful American statistic. These women were daughters, friends, mothers, and so much more.

One must ask themselves why this problem matters. To ignore the genesis of modern day policing in America translates to a lackluster sense of accountability regarding the problems occurring today. And despite growing awareness and widespread efforts to denounce police violence, some white Americans believe that law enforcement and systems of justice within the U.S are impartial and fair. These beliefs demonstrate a type of American idealism that supports constitutional rights to freedom and equality. Yet this thinking can be dangerous, and not because these ideals are an unrealistic reflection of reality, but because that is all they are – ideals.

Given their privilege, white-Americans rely on these ideals, finding it incredibly difficult to fathom how law enforcement could ever pose a danger to their life. Many of these same individuals have been socialized from birth to believe that systems created to dominate and control Black bodies now somehow benefit all Americans equally. But, one does not have to be Black, or oppressed to understand that police brutality is a problem within the U.S. And yet, for so much of the American public, and particularly for the silent majority, it oftentimes feels easier to adopt a laissez-faire approach, to ignore the problem and let the senseless killing of non-white and Black Americans continue. Moreover, dialogue regarding American police violence is intentionally construed to be polarizing and divisive. While ignorance of domestic issues seems harmless, this rationale is incredibly deceptive and often creates more harm than good. Simply put, ignorance of a problem, despite one's intended awareness, does not make the issue any less real, any less devastating, nor any less contentious.

THE POLITICS OF FREE SPEECH & POLITICAL WOKENESS

Bigotry has become increasingly problematic, and even more so in the context of free speech politics within the U.S. The concept of an American 'silent majority' highlights a

concerning trend of ignorance by white Americans towards crucial social issues like police violence. Instead of seeking knowledge and gaining awareness for the betterment of society, this silent majority lacks cultural awareness regarding their opinions, which are often extreme in nature. The silent majority perpetuates systemic inequality and hinders progress towards a more equitable society, utilizing controlling images through the American mass media to engage in a specific form of invalidation regarding Black communities lived experiences with police violence. But, in an unrestricted arena of free speech, music has consistently allowed for influential voices to emerge who intentionally utilize their platforms to shed light on these contentious and polarizing issues, including police brutality.

KENDRICK LAMAR

One such artist is Kendrick Lamar, whose profound impact on the music industry and society at large, cannot be understated. With a career spanning nearly two decades, Lamar's work centers on themes related to Black empowerment, racial discrimination, and social injustice, which is uniquely executed by incorporating his own personal lived experiences. By mixing music with the personal and political, Lamar's confessional style of songwriting has become internationally recognizable and serves as a source of enlightenment for others, and particularly the silent majority, whose understanding of modern popular culture is driven by the contentious work of individuals such as Lamar. More importantly, through his blended form of hip-hop protest music, Lamar uplifts and amplifies the voices of other marginalized individuals who lack the platform to disseminate their own perspective and information on these crucial topics.

With over 70 million records sold in the U.S. alone, and four of his five studio albums being certified platinum or higher by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA),

Kendrick Lamar's extraordinary success reflects not only his popularity, but also the profound impact of his raw, unfiltered style of musical social critique. Lamar uses the negative aspects of his lived experiences within his music to captivate and educate a broader, global audience, regardless of their individual backgrounds or personal experiences. Lamar often challenges government protection of expression by delivering powerful denouncements to free speech politics, specifically as seen with the growing appropriation of political wokeness by the silent majority.

A perfect example is highlighted by Lamar's third studio album, *To Pimp A Butterfly*, (TPAB) released in March of 2015. Primarily centered in elements of hip-hop, TPAB intentionally blends together different musical styles, from soul to jazz, all of which are rooted in the history of African-American music. The 16 track body of work is understood as a consciously 'woke' rap album that explores multiple intersectional topics, including both historical and contemporary, that encompasses the Black-American experience. While each song plays a necessary role in crafting the broader concept album, Lamar carefully chooses one song, "Alright", for release as the album's fourth single.

"Alright" garnered significant attention during the summer of 2015, alongside growing national recognition of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), which began in 2013. Since its release, "Alright" has become inextricably connected to the BLM Movement as its lyrics serve as testimony of the optimism and resistance driving the central mission of BLM in the face of significant adversities. These themes are exemplified by every aspect of the song, from its bold chorus to the very nature of the title, "Alright" is undeniably rooted in protest and free speech politics by tackling themes of police brutality, religion, and most important, hope, even when it

feels like all odds are against you. However, the significance of Lamar's four minute monologue is more than just a protest song. For marginalized communities in the U.S., and especially the Black-American community, "Alright" is recognized as a profound piece of art that goes beyond its lyrics or flow to serve as motivation for the fight against social adversity.

"Alright" is intentionally rooted in collectivism and resilience, ideas that support Lamar's calls for strength, unity, and perseverance everytime he repeats the verse, "we gon' be alright." These characteristics not only describe the power of the Black diaspora, but also exemplifies how an oppressed community remains optimistic in the face of adversity, chooses collaboration, and demonstrates resilience, despite the individualistic nature of a society and legal system that has consistently overlooked them. Protest music is utilized as a means of discussion for inclusion and protection of Black communities, despite oftentimes being outside of what is typically deemed 'socially acceptable'.

Within the first thirty seconds, "Alright" captures its audience by utilizing the essence of protest messaging, setting the stage for a compelling narrative that will continue by encouraging Black-American to keep pushing forward and not looking back. For example, the first line begins with,

> "Alls my life I has to fight, nigga
>
> Alls my life l..
>
> 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."

Immediately, "Alright" begins with a direct quotation from the character Sophia in the 1985 film, "The Color Purple," written initially by Alice Walker. The book is rooted within Black feminism, and uses the movie adaptation to give visual insight into the feminine Black experience of the early 20th Century. Starring Oprah Winfrey and Whoopi Goldberg, the line is interpolated from the scene where Sophia (played by Winfrey) tells Celie (played by Goldberg) that she refuses to endure any more abuse from the men in her life. Sophia details how she has resisted systems of patriarchy her whole life; from fighting brothers and uncles, to even her own father, in a 30-second scene viewers are given the gross reality of being Black and a woman during the early 1930s through feminine rage.

While typical rage can be experienced by most individuals, feminine rage is better understood as the "physiological, ancestral, naked, and embodied response to things gone wrong in the world" (Kali and Feminine Rage, 2018). Like Alteria, India, and DeCynthia, Sophia is the embodiment of feminine rage, with her gender and race informing much of her negative lived experiences throughout the film. Not only are Black women like Sophia having to fight in their homes due to problems like domestic violence, but they also fight a world rooted in patriarchy and Eurocentrism, all of which negatively intersect when aspects to one's identity overlap. Within a single line, Lamar contextualizes Sophia's speech as a metaphor for the lived experiences of many within the Black-American community. But not many know that one of Kendrick's most recognizable and popular song introductions was created by a Black woman. While Lamar uses "Alright", and particularly his first verse, as a vehicle for honoring Black

voices, it cannot be ignored that he speaks from a masculine perspective that informs his lived experiences. These realities bring into question the sense of feminine rage lost when Kendrick uses this quote to elevate the experiences of the entire Black community.

Kendrick engages in similar stylistic techniques throughout “Alright”. By employing the word “I”, Lamar speaks in a first person narrative on behalf of other Black-Americans regarding the disparaging nature of racism and inequality ingrained within American culture, referring to a history of “hard times” and “bad trips” that have attempted to define the community. Within the first ten seconds of “Alright”, Lamar relies on his audience’s experience with intersectionality by utilizing powerful social commentary without explicitly stating a social issue. Moreover, the introduction to “Alright” is followed by two equally impressives verses that now directly challenge the nature of free speech politics in America, specifically as seen with appropriated wokeness:

> “Uh, and when I wake up
>
> I recognize you're looking at me for the pay cut
>
> But homicide be looking at you from the face down
>
> What MAC-11 even boom with the bass down?”

Kendrick begins his first verse with a reflection of the American music industry at large, shifting his focus onto the realities of a lucrative business that he has now gotten himself into. Just like many other systems within a capitalistic society, the music industry is often driven by greed and a growing desire to have an artist with the highest profitability. For Kendrick, this reality means recognizing that those surrounding him may just be supportive merely for economic and financial gains, rather than for his talent, beliefs, or even personality. The

mentioning of a “pay cut” clearly takes a direct hit at how his label perceives him or even the music industry at large, but also alludes to larger themes of how Black bodies have historically and consistently been commodified to serve at the interests of a society rooted in the expansion of white supremacy. The idea of race in America is then more explicitly addressed by the next line where facing down ‘homicide’ serves as a symbolic metaphor for being gunned down and murdered by law enforcement in America.

As defined by Britanica, homicide can be understood as “the killing of one human being by another, [the] non-criminal act as well as the criminal act of murder,” with Kendrick now directly addressing the countless killing of individuals like Alteria, India, DeCynthia and a growing proportion of Black-Americans that is inexcusable and oftentimes not legally justifiable (Britannica, 2023). Kendrick now challenges those who appropriate wokeness in America, talking directly to individuals, and particularly the silent majority, who remain woefully ignorant and unphased by the realities being silenced. These elements are supported by the mentioning of the booming noise of the MAC-11, a fully or semi-automatic gun notoriously known for its loud firing power. MAC-11’s are commonly given silencers to reduce this noise, which serves as a double entendre within Kendrick’s verse by not only referring to the powerful nature of the weapon, but also highlighting the minimization of police brutality and how this recurring violence is silenced, erased, and hidden from American history.

Through his series of rhythm and complex play on words, Kendrick now forces audience members, and particularly the silent majority, to think critically about the role we each play in addressing today’s social issues. Yet expanding on his first verse, Kendrick allows for “Alright” to serve as more than a politically charged response to bystanders, to those choosing to sit idly by

in the face of injustice, and now utilizes the pre-chorus to focus the musical narrative on those who inspired the track: the Black-American community. Talking directly to the community, Kendrick begins by posing a question, stating,

> “Wouldn't you know
>
> We been hurt, been down before
>
> Nigga, when our pride was low
>
> Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
>
> Nigga, and we hate po-po
>
> Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
>
> Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door
>
> My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
>
> But we gon' be alright.”

In the English language, “wouldn’t you know” typically serves as an idiom to express concern or dismay for someone else’s situation. Speaking in a tone almost sarcastically, Lamar utilizes the idiom to address the white-washed perspective of Blackness in America, drawing from ideas that have historically and stereotypically depicted the Black community as angry, impoverished, and weak. Connecting themes previously articulated in the song regarding concepts of race, Kendrick reclaims agency by acknowledging the emotional, physical, and psychological consequences of being Black in America. These negative aspects and realities can define any community, yet it is particularly sensationalized by the American media to generalize the bad, or the negative, within Black communities instead of highlighting or acknowledging the good, or positive.

These social critiques continue well into the second half of the pre-chorus, with Kendrick now explicitly posing a question to listeners on behalf of Black-Americans, asking, “lookin' at the world like, where do we go?” The question from Kendrick is authentic, serving primarily as a referent to the central question underlying, driving, and connecting all studies related to the African diaspora. For over 400 years the diaspora, which occurred as a direct product of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, forcefully dispursed and migrated more than 15 million men, women, and children from Western and Central Africa to regions including the Americas, Carribbeans, and Europe. Due to the removal and separation from their homes, millions of Africans lost connections to their heritage, being forced to assimilate to and adopt the dominant culture, language, and religions of their enslavers and captors. In this line, Lamar essentially suggests that Black-Americans are faced with competing, and contradictory identities. This conflict is produced when one’s ‘Blackness’ is consistently challenged by the ideas, values, and morals of a country rooted in Eurocentrism. But Lamar counters himself, drawing a powerful connection between positive establishments of pride within Black communities and the potential for personal liberation and social revolution that is oftentimes born from adversity.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of ‘political wokeness’ serves as a troubling reminder of the interplay between ignorance and American popular culture. With so many crucial issues plaguing our society today, it is imperative that individuals take an active stance to reject systems that perpetuate disparity and hinder equitable social progress. Justice for Alteria, India, DeCynthia and millions of others Americans can not and will not happen overnight, but the reality of police

brutality, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of lives lost to American law enforcement, demands all of our action and attention right here, right now.

While the silent majority will continue to engage in a protected form of expression by appropriating ‘wokeness’, it is important that society shifts its focus onto advocacy efforts that intentionally choose to promote substantive change, with artists such as Kendrick Lamar. And despite its release nearly a decade ago, “Alright” continues to serve as testament that TPAB is a culturally significant body of art, and most importantly, a positive, effective form of free speech expression that denounces the silent majority and reclaims the idea of being too ‘woke’ in America.

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