

# I Can't Breathe: Musical Protests in the Black Lives Matter Movement

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## Abstract

Due to numerous highly publicized killings of unarmed black men and subsequent lack of justice for their killers, a social tipping point was reached in 2014. In response to these many racial injustices, the social movement called Black Lives Matter was formed to fight institutionalized racism and challenge anti-blackness that permeates the white-dominated society of the United States<sup>4</sup>. Through content analysis of contemporary hip-hop song lyrics, it is shown that music reflects the themes of the Black Lives Matter Movement, such as addressing police brutality and mass incarceration as racial injustices. Music which addresses racial injustice is referred to as musical protest. The potential effects of these musical protests may be to increase participation and awareness, as well as to spread messages of the movement to wider audiences. Music may be a unique rhetorical medium for communicating about police brutality and institutionalized racism, expressing pain and anger nonviolently, and engaging in social conversations and negotiations about race in the United States. Therefore, music may serve crucial functions in the Black Lives Matter Movement so that a complete understanding of the dynamics of the social movement may not be reached without consideration given to musical protests.

## 1. Introduction

With the murder of an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in 2012 and subsequent acquittal of his killer a year later, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement was born<sup>17</sup>. The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) utilized technology and social media to develop a platform and virtual space for social progress, to inform and recruit people, as well as to participate in the larger social conversation for universal human and civil rights<sup>4</sup>. In addition to social media, the BLMM also benefited from auditory media, such as songs, which expressed perspectives and messages shared with the social movement. In order to explore the relationship between music and the BLMM, I will conduct a content analysis of song lyrics. Song lyrics which address racial injustice will be considered musical protest. This study will show how messages of the BLMM are reflected in musical protests.

There has been much music made since 2013 that may be considered musical protest, and unfortunately, most of it has been created in direct response to the numerous tragedies in recent years. Police brutality has become a mainstream issue since 2013; it is an epidemic that disproportionately affects people of color - a *Guardian* study shows that young black men were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers in 2015, for example<sup>26</sup>. I will focus on seven well-known cases of the BLM movement which are highly represented in song lyrics used for nonviolent protest: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile. While there is much work which investigates music as a tool for social movements, there has been no previous research which explores the dynamic between contemporary musical protest, especially hip-hop, and the BLMM. Through content analysis of contemporary hip-hop song lyrics, specific themes emerge which will be linked to the messages of the BLMM. Music may serve functions in the BLMM such as providing an unique rhetorical medium for expressing anger and pain nonviolently, which raises social awareness about the issues BLMM addresses,

increases participation in the social movement, as well as contributes valuable perspective to larger social dialogues and negotiations about race in the United States.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Background Regarding Institutionalized Racism and Police Brutality

#### 2.1.1 *mass incarceration and the new jim crow era*

Central to the BLMM and a focus of many contemporary musical protests, is the issue of mass incarceration; an inherently racist system which primarily criminalizes people of color and relegates them to second-class citizenship<sup>1</sup> (Black Lives Matter 2018). According to civil rights lawyer, Michelle Alexander, residents of the U.S. are living through a New Jim Crow Era in which legal segregation, second-class citizenship, and even slavery, still exists in an adapted, contemporary form that continues to disproportionately affect people of color<sup>1</sup>. Alexander also argues that since the 1970s, as a response to the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, black people, especially males, have been unjustly targeted by law enforcement in the “War on Drugs”, imprisoned longer than white people for the same crime, and once released, have almost the same limited “rights” as a black men who lived in the Jim Crow south<sup>1</sup>. Prisons have been filled, with the prison population increasing over 500% since 1980, necessitating many more being built and fostering the growth of privately-owned for-profit prisons<sup>1</sup>. A clear example of how the system of mass incarceration is racialized, is that currently, 1 in 3 black men from inner cities can expect to serve jail time, as opposed to 1 in 14 white men, when both races commit crimes at nearly the same rate<sup>1</sup>. However, mass incarceration still affects people of all races in the U.S.; a startling fact is that the U.S. makes up only 5% of the world's population, but 1 in every 4 incarcerated people in the world are imprisoned in the United States<sup>1</sup>. The self-proclaimed “land of the free” has over 2.4 million people behind bars, and people of color represent at least 60% of those imprisoned<sup>1</sup>. A primary focus of the BLMM is to acknowledge and address how the system of mass incarceration destroys black lives, and by fighting for all black lives they are also fighting for all lives<sup>5</sup>.

The problem of mass incarceration has only gotten worse since the War on Drugs that was started by Republican president Richard Nixon and escalated by Ronald Reagan - as Democratic president Bill Clinton passed laws which severely impacted black communities and led to another spike in incarceration. From 1990 to 2010, state spending on prisons grew six times the spending of higher education<sup>1</sup>. The racial bias in mass incarceration cannot be overstated; The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, for example, included far more severe punishment for distribution of crack cocaine, which was heavily associated with poor black people, than for powder cocaine which was molecularly identical, since it was associated with higher class whites<sup>1</sup>. A case which clearly illuminates the underlying racism of mass incarceration can be seen in New York state, where 94% of people imprisoned for a drug-related offense are people of color, regardless of the fact that black people and white people use and sell drugs at almost the same rate<sup>1</sup>.

In the 13th amendment to the U.S. constitution, the law abolishing slavery, there exists a “loophole”, in which slavery is still considered acceptable as punishment for crime. This is the foundation of mass incarceration, as it is perfectly legal to discriminate against convicted criminals in nearly all the ways in which it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans<sup>1</sup>. Racism in the U.S. has shifted from legal slavery to politically-veiled criminalization of people of color, creating second-class citizenship for anyone convicted of a crime. As black people are arrested and jailed at far higher rates than white people, this system of exclusion creates a new racial caste system and relegates many black people to an underclass in contemporary U.S. society. Currently, a total of 5.3 million Americans are denied their right to vote<sup>1</sup>. Since black people are incarcerated more often than white people due to structural racism in the U.S., an extraordinary percentage of black men have lost the basic right to vote, reversing decades of social progress and shifting legalized discrimination to a contemporary form. Once criminalized, many black people are also subject to legalized discrimination in education, employment, housing, public benefits, and jury service, in the same way that their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were<sup>1</sup>.

This is evidence that mass incarceration functions more as a racial caste system than a system of crime prevention, Alexander asserts, also identifying slavery and Jim Crow as caste systems - defining “racial caste” as a racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom<sup>1</sup>. There are currently more African-Americans under correctional control - in prison or jail, and on probation or parole - than there were slaves in 1850, a decade before the start of the Civil War<sup>11</sup>. The first prison boom in U.S. history occurred directly after the end of the civil war in the south, in which white people heavily criminalized newly-freed slaves for extremely minor “offenses,” and could use them for labor again, once they were deemed a criminal<sup>1</sup>. For example, in 1871 the Virginia Supreme Court declared that prisoners

were "slaves of the state"<sup>1,30</sup>. The next major prison boom was after Reconstruction in the south, the short period of black excellence and growth in the late 1800s, which included gaining a voice in government for the first time and winning elections<sup>1</sup>. The backlash to successes of black people, be it freedom after the civil war, political and economic growth in Reconstruction, or the civil rights movement, has historically been increased criminalization and prison booms which disproportionately imprison black people and remove their newly-won rights.

The importance of addressing the racist system of mass incarceration in combination with a larger movement to support, affirm, and protect black lives, and therefore all lives, is also articulated by Alexander:

If the movement that emerges to end mass incarceration does not meaningfully address the racial divisions and resentments that gave rise to mass incarceration, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion and concern for every human being – of every class, race, and nationality – within our nation’s borders, including poor whites, who are often pitted against poor people of color, the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge. No task is more urgent for racial justice today than ensuring that America’s current racial caste system is its last<sup>1</sup>.

### *2.1.2 police violence in contemporary united states*

In addition to mass incarceration, the issue of police brutality is a major focus of the BLMM and musical protests, with emphasis that this is another systemic issue which disproportionately affects black people. In the most complete report yet of when and who cops shoot, VICE News investigated fatal and nonfatal incidents involving shootings by police officers; their data set covered about 148,000 police officers who served more than 54 million Americans<sup>2</sup>. A significant finding was that cops in the 50 largest local departments shot at least 3,649 people from 2010 through 2016; that's over 500 people every year. In addition, police fired at citizens and missed on over 700 other occasions<sup>2</sup>. Overall, 20% of the people shot by police officers were unarmed - so, 1 in 5 Americans who were shot by police were completely unarmed, regardless of race<sup>2</sup>. This shows a clear issue with police violence in the U.S., and illuminates the prevalence of the problem across all races.

However, nearly half of the unarmed people shot - 45 percent - were black people. Overall, police officers shot black people two and a half times more often than white people. Black people were shot by police over double the proportional share of the black population in these communities<sup>2</sup>. Another disturbing finding was that black subjects also tended to be younger, and 10% were under 18, compared with less than 2% of whites. A finding which clearly illuminates the harsh difference in police brutality across races was that black people were less likely to be armed than white people, but more likely to be shot, or shot at, by police during low-level incidents, such as routine traffic or pedestrian stops<sup>2</sup>. This is evidence of the institutionalized racism of the law enforcement system in the U.S., and raises issues of implicit bias and the need for improved police training.

Another important fact is that comprehensive data of the total number of fatal and non-fatal shootings across the entire country is currently unknown. Therefore, the true total number of people shot by police, or shot at by police, is likely far higher than even the best determinations available currently. Former FBI Director James Comey called the lack of federal data on police killings "embarrassing and ridiculous," and committed the FBI to a new initiative in 2015 - marking the first effort by federal officials to collect accurate information about fatal shootings by police as they occur<sup>2,7</sup>. After the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, as well as multiple other high-profile cases in which police shot and killed unarmed black men, The Washington Post and The Guardian began keeping a running tally of fatal incidents, as well as details about each killing - including the race of the deceased, and whether the person was armed or not<sup>2,25,28</sup>. Following his comment about the lack of federal data on police shootings, Comey added, "It is unacceptable that The Washington Post and The Guardian newspaper from the U.K. are becoming the lead source of information about violent encounters between police and civilians,"<sup>7</sup>.

It is worth restating that fully reliable totals, collected by the government, of people shot by police in the U.S. do not currently exist. The two most detailed and reliable sources, the Guardian's *The Counted*, and The Washington Post's *Fatal Force*, both use the databases Fatal Encounters, as well as Killed By Police - which is the best source for simply totaling the number of people shot by police. Killedbypolice.net has run since May 1, 2013, and the total number of shootings by police from then to Feb 1, 2018 is recorded at 5,583 people<sup>21</sup>. So in less than five years, over 5,550 people have been shot by police according to Killed By Police, averaging over 1,115 people each year. This may be compared to the Vice News investigation finding that over 500 were people shot per year<sup>2</sup>. This stark difference in the number of people shot per year by police illustrates how even the most reliable sources currently only represent the best underestimations.

It is clear from this data that the U.S. has an issue with police violence, as well as police brutality - which refers to excessive use of violence. This is especially visible when compared to other countries' rates of police shootings - such as The Guardian's finding that police officers in the U.S. fatally shot more people in 24 days than police did in England and Wales, combined, in almost a quarter of a century<sup>16</sup>. They also found that police in the U.S. fatally shot more people in March 2015, than police in Australia did during a span of almost 20 years<sup>16</sup>. Police in Finland fired a total of six bullets in 2013 - a sharp contrast from police in the U.S. who fired 17 bullets at Antonio Zambrano-Montes, a single person "armed" with a rock<sup>16</sup>. In addition, police in the U.S. shot and killed more people every single week in 2015 than German police did in an entire year - an average of six people - as opposed to the "least violent" week in the U.S. in 2015, in which 13 people were fatally shot by police officers<sup>16</sup>. More unarmed black men were fatally shot by U.S. police in 2015, at least 19, than citizens of any race, armed or unarmed, were fatally shot in Germany in two years<sup>16</sup>.

In the current political context, the government's response to the societal issue of police brutality in President Donald Trump's Department of Justice, under Attorney General Jeff Sessions, has been a refusal to continue efforts that led to dramatic drops in police shootings<sup>2</sup>. Cities that adopted the Obama-era reforms, including improved training and new policies around use of force and accountability, saw their number of police shootings decline by about 29 percent on average<sup>2</sup>. These reforms most often consisted of: creating a civilian review board to provide independent oversight, improving officer training, updating use-of-force policies to emphasise the importance of de-escalation and the sanctity of life<sup>2</sup>. Since these issues are not being addressed by the government, there is a need for a social movement such as the BLMM to organize for racial justice.

## 2.2 Messages and Background of the Black Lives Matter Movement

Black Lives Matter Global Network is an international member-led organization, which started as chapter-based, whose mission was to "build local power and to intervene when violence was inflicted on Black communities"<sup>4</sup>. The #BlackLivesMatter Movement began as a call to action in response to state-sanctioned violence and anti-Black racism, as the creators, three radical black female organizers - Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi - were enraged by the case of Trayvon Martin and lack of punishment for his killer in 2013<sup>4</sup>. The BLMM is an "ideological and political intervention in a world where black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression,"<sup>4</sup>.

A Black Lives Matter Freedom Ride to Ferguson was organized, in an effort to obtain justice for Mike Brown, as well as all the other victims of police brutality. After the protests in Ferguson, the decentralized BLMM began to build the foundation for the Black Lives Matter Global Network, a political home for many organizers - many of whom have ousted anti-Black politicians, won critical legislation to improve black lives, and changed the terms of the debate about blackness on a global scale<sup>4</sup>. An early intention of the BLMM was to connect Black people from all over the world who have a shared desire for justice to act together in their communities. As a result of their organizing and relationship building, the BLMM also shifted culture towards and emphasis on the dangerous impacts of anti-blackness. A goal of the movement is social, economic, and political equality for all black people<sup>4</sup>.

With respect to consciousness around mass incarceration and institutionalized racism, the BLMM guiding principles include restorative justice, empathy, diversity, loving engagement, intergenerationality, black families, and black women. In terms of intersectionality, their guiding principles also include transgender affirming, black villages, collective value, unapologetically black, and globalism<sup>5</sup>. The BLMM creates a space in which women are centered, traditional heteronormative thinking is challenged, all ages are encouraged to learn and lead. The movement is also founded on the principle that all black lives matter, regardless of sexual or gender identity, economic status, ability or disability, religious beliefs, immigration status, or criminal record<sup>5</sup>.

In solidarity with Michelle Alexander's assertion that the social movement to overcome mass incarceration and institutionalized racism in the U.S. must require empathy and genuine compassion for every human being, the BLMM explicitly proclaims their emphasis on empathy, and acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating differences and similarities. The BLMM also is concerned with interacting with everyone to learn about and connect with their backgrounds and contexts, while practicing justice and peace in these engagements with people. The BLMM proudly states that:

Every day, we recommit to healing ourselves and each other, and to co-creating alongside comrades, allies, and family a culture where each person feels seen, heard, and supported. We intentionally build and nurture a beloved community that is bonded together through a beautiful struggle that is restorative, not depleting. We work vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people<sup>5</sup>.

Some specific types of institutionalized racial injustices that BLMM fights include the measurable systemic trend that police officers tend to lie in order to protect other officers in court, informally referred to as the “Blue Wall of Silence,” especially when the case involves accusations of excessive use of force<sup>29</sup>. A similar issue of justice is how police officers work with prosecutors, so there is inherent bias when they are put on trial by, essentially, their co-workers - in addition to claims that the relationship between officers and prosecutors results in illegal manipulation of police brutality cases<sup>27</sup>. Another racial justice issue addressed by the BLMM is one of many poisons of the mass incarceration system - the emergence and dominance of private prison and the growing shift towards profiting from punishment. The issue of private prisons is intersectional with the issue of immigration and “illegal aliens,” as private prisons contained nearly three-quarters of federal immigration detainees, as reported by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement reported in 2016<sup>22</sup>. As the BLMM affirms all black lives, regardless of immigration status or place of birth or residence, the issue of privatization of the prison system, which inherently is motivated to expand in order to increase profits, is a major focus of the movement - with one goal being to downsize the prison system.

An issue directly related to the privatization of the prison system is the loophole in the 13th amendment, as framed in the structure of mass incarceration by Michelle Alexander, in which unpaid labor, or slavery, is legal as punishment for a crime. The BLMM fights to end this contemporary form of slavery, which disproportionately affects black people, families, and communities, as companies and wealthy individuals profit from unpaid labor from mostly black inmates. As of 2003, inmates’ wages varied across states between \$0 and 93 cents per day - for example, Texas and Georgia had a \$0 minimum wage for inmates, while some prisoners in private prisons earned a mere \$0.16 per day<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, modern slavery exists in an adapted form which affects all races, but disproportionately targets black people. Another factor is that black people tend to receive longer sentences than white people for the same crime, such as was exemplified in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, and thus, spend more of their lives as slaves of the state. The “War on Drugs,” led by Ronald Reagan was “successful” in the imprisonment of millions of people, but mostly black men, and is largely responsible for the many negative intergenerational effects on black families and communities, such as children growing up without a father - because their father was locked up for twice as long as white fathers for the same crime. This fact is central to the BLMM and contemporary musical protests, and serves as a highly emotional realization, which lends itself particularly well to the rhetorical medium of songs.

## 2.3 The Power of Music and Musicians

### 2.3.1 *music as a social and cultural force*

Most scholars in the social sciences currently believe that music is a social construct, which is influenced by, as well as influences, cultural attitudes and social structures<sup>8,18,24</sup>. Music is a dynamic material, a medium for making, sustaining and changing social worlds and social activities<sup>8</sup>. Music is an incredibly powerful social tool, one that is often overlooked, but proves to be essential to understanding how social movements function in contemporary society. Music plays an integral role in the reflection, documentation, and development of society, social structures, and group behavior - and remains an intriguing cultural universal. The ubiquity and antiquity of music is unique in human culture; musical instruments are some of the oldest known human artifacts, with drums and flutes over 40,000 years old, and some form of music has existed in every documented culture in human history<sup>18</sup>. In addition, it has been argued that human musicality is a special form of social cognition, and music evolved as a tool of social living<sup>18</sup>. Interestingly, people’s emotional reactions to music are tied to other, non-musical, fundamental social phenomena related to group consciousness<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, music can serve as a unique rhetorical medium - in which messages may be spread by marginalized groups to people who would not have been exposed, or receptive, to such a message through other means.

The unique communicative, and inherently emotional, medium of music allows it to serve as a voice for less represented groups; as music listening generates a safe communicative environment and allows for unfiltered expression. Music listening may be contrasted to a political debate, in which the same idea, or even exact words, are much more psychologically threatening than in a song. Therefore, music listening, more passive in nature than political debates, creates a listening environment in which one’s beliefs are not actively “under attack,” since one does not need to feel defensive when casually listening to music - due to the latent understanding that it’s “just a song”. In addition,

due to the universality of music across cultures, music can effectively connect people across social, religious, and racial categories, and serve as a tool for social organization.

### *2.3.2 music as nonviolent protest*

Due to music's potential to reach a wide variety of audiences, the rhetorical style of a song is particularly well-suited as a tool for exposure for social movements. This exposure may be considered here as engagement with the principles of a social movement. The growing audiences who listen to music and hear messages of the BLM movement are exposed to the core principles of the movement articulated in an emotional way, which is in the psychologically non-threatening medium of a song. Music has a special role in framing movement issues and encouraging movement participation<sup>6</sup>. The ability of songs to express anger and pain in a nonviolent manner is another reason why music is adept as a communicative tool for social movements. Music is also very likely to arise when there are high levels of emotion in marginalized social groups<sup>10</sup>. In addition, since music can provide a form of power, in that of a "voice" for oppressed groups without the power to communicate to large audiences, a common theme in musical protest has been to advocate non-conformity and challenge the establishment and status quo. Therefore, protest songs are powerful musical "weapons" that communicate dissatisfaction with the assumptions and norms of society, spark societal change, and build group solidarity<sup>3,14</sup>. This unique personal expression through song unites and empowers socially oppressed groups and provides a communicative medium that is well-suited for social movements, especially grassroots movements.

Within the context of community organizing, protest songs have historically functioned to educate, motivate, and raise consciousness by affecting listeners both emotionally and intellectually<sup>3</sup>. Musical protests have often functioned as the "soundtrack to a movement," in which issues and perspectives are framed in such a uniquely effective way in a song, or collection of songs, that many members of the movement feel that the music is an inseparable part of their social progress<sup>6</sup>.

An example of social change sparking musical responses, which would then contribute to social change can be seen in the U.S. in the 1960s, in which protest songs became mainstream for the first time. The best example of this is the Beatles, as the most popular band of the 20th century embodied social change in their musical and social existences. However, while the Beatles may have been representatives of the growing counter-culture movement, they were only one part of a larger cultural shift in which young musicians began to express their alienation from and disdain for societal institutions<sup>23</sup>. These new, mainstream musical protests included anti-war sentiments, criticisms of the quality of life in an affluent society, and the repressive nature of supposedly democratic institutions<sup>23</sup>. John Lennon of the Beatles released two of the most popular protest songs of all time as solo records without the other band members, with the anti-war songs "Give Peace A Chance," and "Imagine" released in 1969 and 1971, respectively. While the Beatles were, by far, the most popular musicians to embrace musical protests, one would be remiss to discuss 1960s protest music without a focus on Bob Dylan - who was often labeled a "protest singer," due to his special lyrical attention to social issues and folk songs which directly challenge the status quo. Dylan's most well known musical protest about social change is "The Times They Are A Changin'," released in 1964, and most of his popular protest songs are from his early and classic album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, such as "Blowing in the Wind," "Oxford Town," and "Masters of War". In addition to these folk songs being anti-establishment and anti-war, they served a secondary purpose of informing Dylan's generation about serious critiques of life in the U.S. made by the intellectual community<sup>23</sup>. These songs exemplify how contemporary popular music is a "politically significant cultural product" which presents demands for social change by raising the political consciousness of listeners, and by building support for social movements<sup>14</sup>.

## 2.4 The History of African American Musical Protest

### *2.4.1 musical protest during slavery*

"Slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, chain gangs, poverty - all of these have affected the black man in America. All of these and more have been themes in his protest music"<sup>9</sup>. Since the time that African Americans were enslaved in the U.S., and at all times continuing as it does contemporarily, music and musical protest has been a crucial form of expression and a unique method of communication. For example, the historical importance of many slave songs, such as "Wade in the Water"- was to communicate secret messages. On the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman used the song "Wade in the Water" to tell escaping slaves to get off the trail and into the water, in order to make sure the dogs that slave catchers used couldn't sniff out their trail, since people walking through water did not leave a scent trail that the

dogs could follow<sup>15</sup>. However, if one didn't know the secret signal, it would appear as though Tubman was simply singing to pass the time. It was because many slaves knew the secret meanings of these songs, that they could be used to signal a range of things<sup>15</sup>. In addition to capturing a mode of thinking or behavior, or serving as signals of action or warning, music in slavery served other functions as well, such as to celebrate important events as an oral remembrance of history since most slaves had written language, and to express emotions such as anger and pain in response to oppression<sup>15</sup>. These songs proved successful in communicating messages to an intended audience, as well as preserving and transmitting history across generation - up to and including during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s<sup>9,14, 20</sup>.

#### *2.4.2 functions of music in the civil rights movement*

The civil rights movement (CRM) has been described as the greatest singing movement the U.S. has ever experienced<sup>14</sup>. An interesting trend also emerged, as old African American folk music and religious songs, as well as some slave songs, were re-interpreted as musical protest for the social movement. An example of this is the song "Wade in the Water," which experienced a popularization in the black community in the 1960s during the CRM, and served to connect individuals to their ancestors' history of oppression which became a motivating factor for many activists. This link to tradition and previous hardship emphasized a sense that since the African American community has endured so much oppression already, that they will not back down in the face of contemporary racism.

Therefore, music was a way to carry on long held beliefs and traditions, and to build community relations. Important folk songs of the CRM include "We Shall Overcome" "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" and "Woke Up This Morning." These freedom songs reflected the ideology of the early movement and became a direct interpretation of the collective opinions of the CRM, as protesters would often join together to sing these songs as a form of nonviolent protest<sup>14</sup>. This served to create unity and show power, and not only was this form of protest reasonably disruptive, it also prevented the authorities from easily breaking the group apart. Another function of musical protest in the CRM is that it rallied many important figures to the cause of equality, such as Bob Dylan, which further amplified the messages of the movement. Although protest songs "spoke" to outside groups, including the establishment and its sympathizers, this music was often directed at the movement itself, as a motivating factor.

#### *2.4.3 post-civil rights movement: musical protest in the 1970s*

After the Civil Rights Movement and the euphoria of its many successes faded, a voice was still needed to challenge the dominant power structure and ideology of the time period. Funk music emerged as a counter discourse to the status quo - challenging accepted social norms through pro-black song lyrics<sup>20</sup>. George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic is an example of funk musicians who maintained a critical voice which challenged the dominant ideologies of the time period. The band stood out through its critique of economic and social issues such as urban struggles, the nuclear threat, and governmental neglect<sup>20</sup>. "Through references to the Mothership, all-Black towns, and a unified collection of all people, post-civil rights funksters used psychedelic imagery that created a discourse counterculture as a means of protest"<sup>20</sup>.

#### *2.4.4 1980s - 1990s social unrest and hip-hop protest music*

As funk music challenged dominant ideologies, the emergence of hip-hop music served to continue this musical protest and elevate it to a new level. Participation in hip-hop culture can be seen as part of a valid social movement that is focused on a reconception of identity. By challenging the dominant conceptions of poor and minority groups, hip-hop participants over time have served to redefine the identities of these communities. It has also been shown that current hip-hop culture possesses important movement traits such as intentionality, contestation, and collective identity, which are all framed by the attributed importance of early hip-hop protests (Callias 2013). One of the earliest examples of popular hip-hop protest music was "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy, released originally in 1989. This song samples "Say it loud: I'm black and I'm proud" by James Brown - exemplifying how many hip-hop artists incorporate previous forms of musical protests into their pro-black messages and contemporary denunciations of racial injustices.

The most notable musical protests in hip-hop in the 1980s was released by the group N.W.A on their 1988 album *Straight Outta Compton*, with the song "Fuck tha Police." This song includes lyrics such as "[I] got it bad 'cause I'm brown, and not the other color, so police think, they have the authority to kill a minority." Founding member of N.W.A. Dr. Dre explained that the song was created as a direct response to police brutality that they, and many members of their community, faced regularly - specifically after one instance where members of N.W.A were forced by police to

lay face down in the street with guns to their heads. There was even a movie released in 2015 following the story of N.W.A. which grossed over \$200 million globally, becoming the highest-grossing movie from an African American director ever<sup>12</sup>. This success shows the continued impact of their musical protest 30 years later and the cultural importance of their musical protest.

Following the groundbreaking music of N.W.A., the issue of police brutality became a major focus of musical protests in 1991, when an African-American motorist, Rodney King, was pursued for speeding, and after a brief chase, was met by 21 police officers. In full view of everyone, King was severely beaten by three white LAPD officers, as a sergeant and the remaining 17 officers merely watched the violence occur. However, unknown to the police officers, the event was videotaped by an amateur cameraman, and sold to a local television station - leading to it being broadcasted thousands of times - and provoking a public crisis over police brutality and racism<sup>13</sup>. When the police officers who had been videotaped beating motorist Rodney King were found not guilty for their actions in 1992, Los Angeles erupted in the worst rioting the U.S. had seen since the 1960s. The loss of life and destruction of property left a significant scar on the city and this event continues to be referenced in contemporary musical protests<sup>19</sup>. One musical response to the Rodney King case, the song "Like a King" by Ben Harper, also linked the racial injustice to the CRM and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., showing how the history of African American protest is a crucial element of modern musical protest.

In addition to the Rodney King case and L.A. riots, the issues of poverty and mass incarceration were starting to become more severe and thus, more visible to many affected by institutionalized racism. One would be remiss when discussing 1990s musical protest without an emphasis on Tupac Shakur, who was considered in the mainstream media as a revolutionary, a "thug," and also a compassionate intellectual. One of Tupac's most popular songs, which is still well-known in contemporary contexts, is "Changes," which include the lyrics "Don't conceal the fact, the penitentiary's packed and it's filled with blacks," and "Instead of a war on poverty, they got a war on drugs so the police can bother me." Overall, hip-hop in the 1990s served as an unapologetic form of nonviolent protest which challenged the status quo as well as illuminated and communicated messages about institutionalized racism and police brutality.

### **3. Methodology**

Data was collected using qualitative, content analysis of song lyrics. Themes which emerge from the music were linked to the messages of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The sample of music is purposive; the selected music was released from January 1, 2012 to March 1, 2018 and addresses racial injustice. Through over three months of music listening on the streaming service Spotify, whenever I was exposed to lyrics which addressed racial injustice, I added it to a playlist created specifically for this project. In addition to being one of the largest musical platforms, Spotify also works as a measure of musical popularity, as musicians are ranked based on the number of times people have played their music - this data exist for individual songs and for the artist overall. In addition, the algorithms used by Spotify provide listeners with music that is similar to what they have been listening to, so the more I listened to music, especially hip-hop, which contained lyrics protesting racial injustice, the more music I was exposed to of a similar kind. Therefore, my sample consists of popular music released from January 2012 to March 2018, which contains lyrics that address racial injustice. Song lyrics which address racial injustice will be referred to as musical protest.

In the analysis of lyrics, I will explore the themes of being anti-police brutality, anti-mass incarceration, and being pro-black. The coding scheme for content analysis will include the following categories:

1. Criticisms of Police in United States
  - a. Addressing police brutality as a racial issue
  - b. Criticism of how police officers are rarely indicted or imprisoned for killing unarmed black people (includes criticism of lack of justice for instances when there is video evidence)
2. References to Mass Incarceration
  - a. Addressing mass incarceration as a racialized system, so black people in U.S. are imprisoned at higher rates and given longer sentences than white people
  - b. Addressing the loophole in the 13th Amendment which allows slavery as punishment for crime, and its fundamentally racist motivations (includes references to second class citizenship)
  - c. Addressing that Ronald Reagan's "War on Drugs" was racially motivated and has disproportionately affected black people

3. Addressing anti-blackness that permeates U.S. society (includes expressions of pro-black sentiments)
4. References to one of seven highly publicized cases of unarmed black men who were killed (Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile)
5. Explicit references to the BLMM which express support and/or solidarity with the social movement (including reference to the protest chants “Hands up, don’t shoot” and “I Can’t Breathe”)

It will be shown that the themes which emerge in the music are closely related to messages of the BLMM. Each category and theme represents both themes of musical protest, as well as primary messages of the BLMM.

## 4. Data

### 4.1. Criticisms of Police in U.S.

#### a. *Addressing Police Brutality as a Racial Issue*

Joey Bada\$\$ “BABYLON”

Turn on to CNN, look at what I see again  
 It's another black man died at the white hand of justice  
 To tell the truth, man, I'm fucking disgusted  
 I fear for the lives for my sisters, my brothers  
 .....Fuck the cops  
 Fuck the system and the government, you fuckers not  
 Protecting and serving  
 You more like damaging and hurting  
 And letting off shots 'till you motherfuckers certain  
 He ain't breathing, you made it clear  
 Fuck your breath, nigga, don't even deserve air

Joey Bada\$\$ “AMERIKKKAN IDOL”

The code words to killing a black man by police is "He's got a gun"  
 Damned if he do, damned if he don't, damned if he runs

J. Cole “High for Hours”

For real? I thought this was thou shalt not kill  
 But police still letting off on niggas in the Ville  
 Claiming that he reached for a gun  
 They really think we dumb and got a death wish  
 Now somebody's son is laying breathless

Dizzy Wright “I Need Answers”

Never thought today God would take my friend  
 But I'm dealing with it  
 The police is at it again, and they killing the innocent  
 ...How we supposed to feel safe if you always act scared of us?

Why, do they kill us when they feel uncomfortable?

This shit is dysfunctional  
 Lost one of my homies about a month ago  
 Why do we always feel like a target?  
 If I know it's because my skin, what would you call it?  
 I need answers man

Dizzy Wright “They Know Why”

Ain't you supposed to serve and protect me?

Do the color of my skin make you neglect me?  
Do I gotta die to make your heart feel heavy?  
....I see the way you act when you get near us  
I'm realizing why the police fear us  
They know why, they know fucking why, aye  
And if you don't obey then they'll kill ya

KXNG CROOKED "I Can't Breathe"  
The cops hate a black man to death  
They tell me that mentality left, it didn't leave  
See being black come with a price  
Sometimes we gotta pay with our life, our family grieve  
....I won't trust the police again  
Another black man murdered  
In the streets by police, he won't hug his own niece again

How many tears gotta fall?  
How many peers gotta fall?  
The cops kill instead of capture  
A black man of that stature  
How many fears were involved?  
How many cheered what they saw?  
See, equality's the problem  
How many years 'till it's solved?

**b. Criticism of How Police Officers are Rarely Indicted or Imprisoned for Killing Unarmed Black People (Includes Criticism of Lack of Justice for Instances When There Is Video Evidence)**

Eminem "Untouchable"  
Fucked up, but what the fuck am I to do?  
I keep telling myself, keep doing like you're doing  
No matter how many lives you ruin  
It's for the red, white and blue  
Time to go find a new one and split his head right in two  
No one's ever indicted you  
Why? 'Cause your a white boy, white boy in your cop car

No one oversees these cops and  
All we see is them beat charges  
We done seen them beat Rodney King unconscious, and got off  
So we don't need all you crooked police officers' peace offerings  
Just keep marching, 'till we reach Congress

Dizzy Wright "They Know Why"  
Sad part is he still get paid tomorrow  
Paid suspension after he done took a life  
Fuck the man that think that shit good advice  
....I seen this kid crying cause his father died  
All these losers in these badges being qualified

T.I. "Black Man"  
Kill a nigga, no penalty  
They can do that shit legally

KXNG CROOKED “I Can’t Breathe”  
The grand jury never indicts  
The grand dragon’s wearing his white, true indeed  
....Cops workin’ with the prosecutor  
Prosecutor manipulate the grand jury  
Grand jury say it’s no indictment  
Send the community into levels past fury

#### 4.2 References to Mass Incarceration

##### a. *Addressing Mass Incarceration as a Racialized System, so Black People in U.S. are Imprisoned at Higher Rates and Given Longer Sentences Than White People*

Joey Bada\$\$ “LEGENDARY”  
It's clear we living in hell, the life of a black male  
Right out the womb you come out, and it's a bunch of blackmail  
Just waiting for you to fail, a special room in the jail  
With your name, a number on it so you property now

Joey Bada\$\$ “BABYLON”  
Nowadays they hanging us by a different tree  
Branches of the government, I can name all three  
Judicial, legislative and executive  
Lock your pops away, your moms then next the kids

Dizzy Wright “Outrageous”  
Doing more time for the same crime  
I can't even leave past state lines  
You can tell this outrageous  
Jail time feel like slavery  
Only keep them there for the paycheck

Kendrick Lamar “Blacker the Berry”  
I mean it's evident I'm irrelevant to society  
That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me  
....Institutionalize manipulation and lies

Dizzy Wright “Loophole”  
And for the record I ain't stopping until they downsize the prison systems  
But this the land of free though  
That's what they taught us, what you and me know  
That's some bullshit we come from next generational trauma  
I'm talking about these black fathers taken away from they kids mama

##### b. *Addressing the Loophole in the 13th Amendment Which Allows Slavery as Punishment for Crime, and its Fundamentally Racist Motivations (Includes References to Second Class Citizenship)*

Dizzy Wright “Loophole (feat. Nowdaze)”  
They want to charge us for a crime so they can treat us like a slave  
But I ain't making this up look what the loophole say  
....I got to spread the message fast  
'Cause I know the truth about them tryna put us in a permanent second class

I can't keep living life this way  
Always watching out for the loophole, yeah yeah  
Land of the free but we all got a price to pay  
Got to watch out for the loophole, yeah yeah  
And they hate it when a young man got something to say  
I got something to say  
But nothings changed

T.I. "Warzone"  
This modern day slavery, the prison publicly traded  
And the jig's up  
The Constitution and Emancipation Proclamation's just a fuckin' piece of paper

Killer Mike "Reagan"  
'Cause free labor's the cornerstone of US economics  
'Cause slavery was abolished, unless you are in prison  
You think I am bullshitting, then read the 13th Amendment  
Involuntary servitude and slavery it prohibits  
That's why they giving drug offenders time in double digits

*c. Addressing that Ronald Reagan's "War on Drugs" was Racially Motivated and Has Disproportionately Affected Black People*

Dizzy Wright "Loophole"  
Nah we ain't trying to go back to them Ronald Reagan days  
They want to charge us for a crime so they can treat us like a slave

T.I. "Warzone"  
Heard it from buddy who took for the fall for Watergate  
The war on drugs was just a war on us  
Give us all these guns, give us all this dust  
Change all them laws, lock all us up

Killer Mike "Reagan"  
The end of the Reagan Era, I'm like eleven, twelve, or  
Old enough to understand the shit'll change forever  
They declared a war on drugs, like a war on terror  
But what it really did was let the police terrorize whoever  
But mostly black boys, but they would call us "niggers"  
And lay us on our belly, while they fingers on they triggers  
They boots was on our head, they dogs was on our crotches  
And they would beat us up if we had diamonds on our watches  
And they would take our drugs and money, as they pick our pockets  
I guess that that's the privilege of policing for some profit  
But thanks to Reaganomics, prisons turned to profits

**4.3. Addressing General Anti-blackness that Permeates U.S. Society (Includes Expressions of Pro-black Sentiments)**

Joey Bada\$\$ "TEMPTATION"  
The government been trying to take away what's ours  
It's really all about the money and the power  
I just wanna see my people empowered

Joey Bada\$\$ “Y U DON’T LOVE ME (MISS AMERIKKKA)”

Tell me why you don’t love me

Why you always misjudge me?

Why you always put so many things above me?

Why you lead me to believe that I’m ugly?

Why you never trust me?

Why you treat me like I don’t matter?

Why you always kicking my ladder?

Why you never hearing my side to the story?

Never look me in my eyes, say sorry?

Joey Bada\$\$ “AMERIKKKAN IDOL”

And they judging just because my skin color is brown

And for that, they wanna leave me dead in the ground

And have the nerve to blame it all on my background

Sorry white Amerikkka but I’m about to black out

Got a message for the world and I won’t back out

J. Cole “High for Hours”

So now its fuck the government, they see my niggas struggling

And they don’t give a fuck at all and that’s wrong, yeah

Dizzy Wright “Outrageous”

They don’t care about a nigga outcome

They really only focus on the income

Black versus white, who’s racist?

Everything looking outrageous

Shit feels so outdated

But we still deal with it on the daily, I swear

Kendrick “Blacker the Berry”

You never liked us anyway

Fuck your friendship, I meant it

I'm African-American, I'm African

I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village

....You hate me don't you?

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture

.....You sabotage my community, making a killing

4.4. References to One of Seven Highly Publicized Cases of Unarmed Black Men Who Were Killed (Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile)

Joey Bada\$\$ “BABYLON”

You seen us all holding hands

Fifty years later still see my brothers choked to death

R.I.P. to Eric Garner, only right I show respect

Joey Bada\$\$ “AMERIKKKAN IDOL”

Alton Sterlings are happening every day in this country and around the world

The scary part, boys and girls, is most of these stories

Don't make it to the news and reach mass consciousness

It is for sure time that we as a people stand up for acknowledgement

and accomplishment of what we call human rights

J. Cole "Neighbors"  
It's this society that make  
Every nigga feel like a candidate  
For a Trayvon kinda fate  
Even when your crib sit on a lake

Kendrick Lamar "Blacker the Berry"  
I know you hate me, don't you?  
You hate my people, I can tell because it's threats when I see you  
I can tell because your ways deceitful  
....So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street?  
Dizzy Wright "Deal wit"  
But everyday we're waking up and pray the police don't do us like Freddie Grey  
I heard there's niggas dying everyday  
Y'all don't think they got the homies losing sleep?  
My community lack unity  
Who gonna help us with these opportunities?

T.I. feat. RaRa "Black Man"  
Police see I got my hands up  
Still wanna kill me, they don't understand us  
They be lookin' for a reason just to shoot me  
And wanna do me how they do us in the movies  
Or how they do it out in Baton Rouge  
Or Ferguson, or Florida, or Baltimore, they make excuses  
Like "I did it cause I thought he had a pistol"

12 try to take a nigga off the street  
Make the gun sound off for Mike Brown  
Take a nigga life when you face down  
Hoodie gang strong like Trayvon

T.I "Warzone"  
They pull you over, ask you where your license at  
Be careful reachin' for it, you know you can die for that  
And this ain't nothin' new, just got cameras so you can see the shit  
Got Dr. King and Abe Lincoln askin' where the freedom at  
....Imagine Trayvon asking' why you followed me  
Feel threatened, hit him and whip him, that's when he shot him down

....Pardon me, somebody tell me what happened to Alton  
Sterling, killed Philando right in front of the girl  
And the world saw  
Everybody's reaction was, "Hell naw"

KXNG CROOKED "I Can't Breathe"  
So what's a black mom tell her son?  
"They might hate the mere sight of you  
So no, I can't buy that pellet gun  
They might try to Tamir Rice you"

....Protestors on the sidewalk  
They say Eric Garner was choked here  
I say we burn this whole shit down  
But won't nothin' change when the smoke clear  
That's cause the system is broken  
Another victim of a chokin'  
By a modern day lynch mob  
The cops probably wished they could've roped him

#### 4.5. Explicit References to the BLMM which Express Support and/or Solidarity with the Social Movement (Including References to the Protest Chants "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and "I Can't Breathe")

Joey Bada\$\$ "BABYLON"  
Don't even deserve shit, don't even deserve nothing  
If black lives really mattered you niggas would do something  
Instead we mean nothing, in fact we being hunted

Eminem "Untouchable"  
Hands up, officer don't shoot  
....How can we have higher standards?  
As Dallas overshadows the battle for Black Lives Matter

Dizzy Wright "I Need Answers"  
Tryna get through to the public, marching and screaming for justice  
...Hands up, don't shoot!  
We beg to be humans  
....Fighting in a lose lose battle, trying to bring peace but it don't come natural  
Walking in the streets, holding up signs  
And they throwing tear gas at us like the shit don't matter  
It was a peaceful protest before looters  
We the violent ones, but they the shooters?  
Can't be teaching these kids you gon be mistreated by the police for being a human  
I mean what kind of future is that?

Dizzy Wright "They Know Why"  
This the same country that enslaved us  
Black lives matter, scattered 'cause this is how you made us  
....How you see us scream but you ain't hear us?

T.I. "Black Man"  
We say black lives matter, you say all lives  
But y'all ain't the ones getting' hogtied

T.I. "Warzone"  
Can't you see we living in a warzone?  
Guess you don't notice when you livin' in it  
Like every weekend it's a man down  
Ain't got no pity for the innocent so I'ma represent it  
Dedicated, tell 'em, "Hands up, can't breathe  
Hands up, can't breathe, Hands up, can't breathe"

KXNG CROOKED “I Can’t Breathe”  
No justice, no peace again

They tell me I’m resisting arrest  
But I’m only protecting my breath, I can’t breathe  
....I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe

## 6. Conclusion

The lyrics in each category address the anti-blackness that dominates U.S. society as well as criticize the law enforcement/criminal justice system as racist. These major themes which emerged from content analysis of contemporary hip-hop song lyrics strongly reflect the primary messages of the BLMM. Since music is a cultural universal, it has the ability to generate a comfortable listening environment, in which perspectives may reach wider audiences and ideas of social change can be expressed in an emotional, but non-threatening, manner. Due to the prevalence of music listening in contemporary society, with the emergence of streaming services such as Spotify, this rhetorical medium is particularly effective to deliver messages of the BLMM in an honest and persuasive fashion. Therefore, songs which express sentiments shared by the BLMM are unique tools and thus, a crucial part of the movement so that a complete understanding of the BLMM may not be reached without consideration given to musical protests.

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