

## Righteous Propaganda: On Hip-Hop's Response to Police Brutality

On June 28, 2015, rapper Kendrick Lamar performed his hit song “Alright” on top of a graffitied police car at the BET Awards. Soon after, he drew criticism for the subversiveness of the performance and the song’s explicitly hostile lyrics towards America’s law enforcement. In this paper I entertain and respond to two arguments I explicate from these grievances: that (1) both “Alright” and Lamar’s performance of it encourage hostility towards America’s law enforcement in its entirety for police brutality when most officers are not guilty of this offence and (2) Lamar appeals to his mass audience’s emotions when the issue at hand ought to be resolved through rational discourse. After undermining the first concern by establishing that police brutality is a structural problem that is much bigger than the individual officers who actually engage in it, I reject the second concern using Jason Stanley’s conception of good propaganda. Utilizing this framework, I assert that the performance in question must appeal to its audience’s emotions because concerns of racial minorities, such as police brutality, are largely ignored by the dominant culture when expressed through rational discourse. I conclude that the criticism of Lamar is misguided and that his “Alright” performance is ultimately something that is morally praiseworthy.

The relationship between art and politics has for a long time been a volatile one. Recall, for example, Plato’s paranoid fixation on expelling *all* poets from his ideal society and the justification he uses for taking such drastic measures: “Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind is ever to increase in happiness and virtue” (606d). As we can see here, the artist’s ability to arouse our wildest emotions is a terrifying threat for the sober mind like Plato concerned with ruling the masses with reason. And ever since Plato’s gripes with poets we have seen time and time again the tension between art and politics resurface, from Nazi Germany’s censorship of what was considered “degenerate art” to the rumblings of the anti-authoritarian feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot in contemporary Russia.

In the United States, one way the clash between art and politics has manifested itself has been in hip-hop’s response to police brutality. With countless incidents of police officers violently confronting and, in some cases, killing innocent black people along with the fact that the relevant governing bodies have done very little in response to these incidents, hip-hop has remained an important vehicle for black Americans to voice their frustrations. And as a song that has become the unofficial anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement, Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 hit “Alright” has been at the forefront of this response. The song itself generally shies away from any negativity with its indefatigably optimistic punchline (“we gon’ be alright!”) and encouraging pleas for unity; nevertheless, a particularly scathing line is directed towards America’s law enforcement: “And we hate po-po/Wanna kill us dead in the street fo-sho.” Such hostility was escalated even further when Lamar performed

1 “Alright” at the BET Awards in June 2015 while standing on top of a graffitied  
2 police car in front of the American flag, making it very clear that the line in  
3 question was not to be taken lightly.

4 Not long after, Lamar became a topic of conversation when a panel of Fox  
5 News reporters criticized the way his performance blatantly undermined  
6 America’s law enforcement and poisoned the minds of his impressionable  
7 audience. Geraldo Rivera particularly summed up this criticism well when he  
8 growled: “This is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young  
9 African-Americans than racism in recent years. This is exactly the wrong  
10 message” (00:00:59 - 00:01:06). Now before we get into the specifics of this  
11 criticism, you might ask what the purpose of entertaining it in the first place is.  
12 Certainly, talking heads on news outlets like Fox are no strangers to  
13 controversy, often raising eyebrows for nothing more than the sake of getting  
14 attention and ratings. What then would make Lamar’s performance worth  
15 defending compared to the plethora of other storylines news outlets jump at to  
16 have an opinion on? One way to address this question is by taking note of the  
17 fact that beyond whatever shock value was intended by the way the Fox panel in  
18 question worded their misgivings with Lamar’s performance (for one, I think  
19 we can safely assume that hip-hop isn’t actually more damaging than racism to  
20 young African-Americans), there are nonetheless philosophically interesting  
21 concerns underlying it that deserve our attention. To a further extent,  
22 confronting the issue at hand will help us address the broader question of how a  
23 political system ought to interact with artistic expression in a healthy society.

24 With that said, I see two legitimate concerns that could be used to support  
25 the Fox crew’s remarks: that (1) both “Alright” and Lamar’s performance of it  
26 conflate an injustice that only a relatively small percentage of police officers are  
27 guilty of with America’s law enforcement in its entirety and, in the same vein as  
28 Plato, (2) hip-hop artists merely stir up their audience’s emotions instead of  
29 actually educating them about important social issues through rational  
30 discourse. If either one of these concerns proves to hold up, we can assume that  
31 the ignorance and misplaced hostility towards societal authoritative figures  
32 encouraged by Lamar’s “Alright” performance would mean that it would result  
33 in more harm than good and Rivera would be right to admonish it as “exactly  
34 the wrong message.”

35 For now, let’s begin with the first concern. It is well-documented that  
36 black people are killed at an alarmingly disproportionate rate by police officers  
37 compared to white people in the United States. But is this to say America’s law  
38 enforcement as a whole is guilty of police brutality? While a number of  
39 complex factors make it difficult for us to quantify the exact percentage of  
40 police officers who are guilty of this offence, it seems safe enough to assume  
41 that as devastating as police brutality is, a relatively small minority of “bad  
42 apples” are responsible for it. Now returning to Lamar’s anti-police lyrics and  
43 performance piece, it is clear that such a distinction is not made. Instead, we as  
44 listeners and viewers are exposed to allusions of a corrupt and blameworthy  
45 police *force*. To the Fox panel’s point, perhaps Lamar’s impressionable  
46 audience could be swayed to resent all police officers and ignore this important

1 distinction. Wouldn't it then be fair to conclude that this kind of conflation  
2 would influence black Americans to act unnecessarily aggressively towards  
3 even the most blameless police officers, encourage racial tension and  
4 ultimately help perpetuate the same socio-economic disadvantages that need to  
5 be improved?

6 But despite this apparent discrepancy, the "bad apple" argument doesn't  
7 hold much weight if we approach it from a different angle. In his 2018 standup  
8 performance, *Tamborine*, Chris Rock convincingly dismisses it in the following  
9 way:

10  
11 Whenever the cops gun down an innocent black man, they always say the same  
12 thing; it's like, "Well, it's not most cops. It's just a few bad apples..." Here's the  
13 thing: I know it's hard being a cop... but some jobs can't have bad apples. In some  
14 jobs everybody's gotta be good, like pilots. American Airlines can't be like, "most  
15 of our pilots like to land. We just got a few bad apples who like to crash into the  
16 mountains. Please bear with us." (00:04:51- 00:05:32)

17  
18 In the context of police brutality, Rock's analogy is apt. Would being  
19 reassured that the pilot flying a plane you were on is *most likely* not going to  
20 crash it into the mountains be something to feel calm about? Similarly, would  
21 being reassured that whenever you leave your house the passing police officer  
22 you see will *most likely* not shoot you for nothing other than the colour of your  
23 skin be something to feel safe about? The answer in both cases is certainly "no,"  
24 which tells us that in the same way that the presence of only a few rogue pilots  
25 would justify a fear and anger towards the airline that employs them, so too  
26 should America's law enforcement be held accountable for the police brutality  
27 that takes place within it; in both cases the potential devastating consequences  
28 of incompetency means that there can be no tolerance for "bad apples."

29 It is also worth noting that the problem of police brutality runs deeper than  
30 the police officers who engage in it themselves and the police force that  
31 employs them. Take the "blue code of silence," for example, which refers to the  
32 informal allegiance that police officers often take to not report the mishaps of  
33 their colleagues, making it easy for police brutality to go undetected unless  
34 civilians take it upon themselves to record it. The officers who participate in this  
35 norm, therefore, can ultimately be said to help perpetuate police brutality as  
36 bystanders even if they don't necessarily engage in it themselves.

37 As we can see here, police brutality is much bigger than the relatively small  
38 number of officers who actually participate in it and involves the police force  
39 that employs these officers and the passivity of fellow officers for it to take  
40 place. Since this means that police brutality is a structural problem rather than  
41 something that's merely incidental, Lamar's hostile performance directed  
42 towards America's law enforcement as a dysfunctional mechanism can be  
43 compatible with the fact that not all police officers are personally responsible  
44 for perpetuating it. If a whole system is in place that enables injustice, then it  
45 seems only right to call out that system for being unjust; and if America's law  
46 enforcement is a system that enables police brutality, Lamar is right to expose it  
47 as such.

1 But even if we agree that Lamar’s hostility towards America’s law  
2 enforcement is justified, does that necessarily mean that hip-hop is the right  
3 platform to express it? What gives artists the special privilege of educating the  
4 public about intricate social issues as opposed to anyone else? And finally, if  
5 artistic expression proves to be a flawed means of communicating the  
6 intricacies of social issues, what kind of impact would that have on those on the  
7 receiving end of it? With questions like these in mind, it’s clear that we are not  
8 out of the woods yet in defending Lamar’s performance, and if we entertain the  
9 Platonic conception of art as a dangerous manipulative tool that is antithetical to  
10 reason, Rivera’s insistence that Lamar’s performance was “exactly the wrong  
11 message” doesn’t seem so farfetched anymore. Think about it this way: Lamar’s  
12 “Alright” performance depicts America’s law enforcement negatively, but what  
13 actually makes him persuasive? We as an audience are compelled to side with  
14 Lamar on the issue, but what draws us to side with him are things like the  
15 compositional quality of the song and the breath-taking spectacle of the  
16 presentation of it, both of which speak to our emotional sensibilities and not to  
17 our capacity to reason. At best we might say that to really learn about police  
18 brutality would involve being exposed to both sides of the matter from an  
19 unbiased source through rational discourse rather than through the stylistic  
20 achievements of an artist’s performance. If you’re not so charitable you might  
21 go so far as to say that by manipulating his audience’s emotions to take his side  
22 on the matter through his art, Lamar’s “Alright” performance is really nothing  
23 more than propaganda — righteous propaganda perhaps, but propaganda  
24 nonetheless.

25 And as it turns out, this challenge is a difficult one to overcome, as Lamar’s  
26 performance of “Alright” seems to check off all the boxes for what can be  
27 considered propaganda. We might then have to admit that besides Lamar’s good  
28 intentions and even the truth his “Alright” performance is grounded in, the  
29 message would be better expressed differently. More generally we might say  
30 that artists don’t necessarily merit the widespread epistemic influence they have  
31 in our society, which is to say that their capacity to advance our knowledge as  
32 an audience is much more limited than it lets on. Going a step further, seeing  
33 Lamar as a propagandist would mean that the young audience exposed to his art  
34 runs the risk of complacently consuming the beliefs he subjects them to instead  
35 of becoming open-minded about social issues as independent freethinkers. And  
36 if these worries prove to hold up, the Fox panel’s criticism of Lamar would still  
37 stand.

38 Addressing these concerns requires the somewhat counter-intuitive  
39 approach of accepting that Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” performance is  
40 propaganda but vouching for it anyway. To do this we will have to turn to a  
41 framework championed by Jason Stanley in his book *How Propaganda Works*.  
42 It is Stanley’s contention that not only do certain circumstances call for  
43 propaganda, but that propaganda can actually be a *good thing* that helps bring  
44 people together. For now, let’s take a look at the justification he uses for this  
45 position:  
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1        There are many times in which the perspectives of a group are invisible from the  
 2        rest of the citizens. This is so, for example, when there is excessive and irrational  
 3        fear of that group, or excessive and irrational commitment to their inferiority... In  
 4        such a situation, there is no obvious deliberative way to make that group visible,  
 5        no method that appeals to reason to bring members of that group into equal  
 6        political standing. (Stanley 114-115)

7  
 8        To Stanley’s point, if a certain societal perspective is discredited from the  
 9        onset because a dominant culture’s prejudicial beliefs prevent it from being able  
 10       to properly appreciate this perspective, how far will rational discourse take the  
 11       “invisible” group at hand? Not very far it seems if the dominant culture is  
 12       unreasonable from the get go. It also doesn’t take much of a stretch of the  
 13       imagination to see that police brutality is exactly the sort of problem that fits  
 14       this description. Think about the case of Eric Garner, for example, one of  
 15       several incidents in which a police officer killed an innocent black person and  
 16       was absolved of any crime, even when the incident was *recorded on video*; and  
 17       if a video recording of a particular societal problem is not reasonable enough to  
 18       get you to see it as such then what is?

19       For Stanley, propaganda can importantly bridge the gap between the  
 20       prejudiced dominant culture unwilling to listen and the desperate pleas of a  
 21       marginalized group to be heard (117). The righteous propagandist in this sense  
 22       doesn’t simply manipulate the emotions of his or her audience to consolidate  
 23       power like a demagogue would, but instead touches an audience’s emotions to  
 24       allow some of them to empathize with a struggle they might otherwise not  
 25       understand and, for others, to voice the pain of the voiceless. Returning to  
 26       Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” performance, we can counter Rivera’s harsh words  
 27       and on the contrary confidently say that it is actually exactly the *right* message:  
 28       that when a dominant culture can’t be reasoned with, a brilliantly crafted song  
 29       and a riveting performance of it can be enough to demand its attention.

30       In this paper I have defended Kendrick Lamar’s performance of “Alright”  
 31       from two underlying concerns that I interpreted from the Fox panel’s criticism  
 32       of it: that Lamar exaggerates the problem of police brutality and that he  
 33       manipulates his audience’s emotions to get this message across instead of  
 34       appealing to their reason. I have defended Lamar from both of these criticisms  
 35       by demonstrating that on the one hand, police brutality is a structural problem  
 36       that is much more complex than merely a set of unrelated incidents and on the  
 37       other hand that Lamar’s effect on his audience’s emotions was a necessary tool  
 38       for him as a member of an “invisible” group to express the experience of police  
 39       brutality. An implication of my argument is that contrary to the Platonic notion  
 40       that contends that the presence of artists in a society threatens to make it less  
 41       reasonable, art can in fact be an indispensable tool used to make a society more  
 42       reasonable than it would have been otherwise.

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#### 44       **Works Cited**

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