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‘Doing fifty-five in a fifty-four’:  
Hip hop, cop voice and the  
cadence of white supremacy  
in the United States

ABSTRACT  
This article examines how police officers in the United States use a racialized and gendered way of speaking called ‘cop voice’ to provoke fear and extreme forms of compliance from people of colour. Through autoethnographic analysis coupled with sonic attention to how Jay-Z (‘99 Problems’), Public Enemy (‘Get the Fuck Out of Dodge’) and Prince Paul (‘The Men in Blue’) represent ‘cop voice’ through shifts in their rapping flow or by using white guest rappers, ‘Doing 55 in a 54’ argues that police weaponize their voices. Identifying and listening closely to these examples of cop voice reveal how people who are raced as ‘white’ in the United States mobilize this subject position in their voices through particular cadences that audibly signify racial authority, while at the same time, never hearing themselves as doing so.

KEYWORDS  
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On 20 February 2015, I listened to NWA’s 1988 street anthem ‘Fuck the Police’ while surrounded by cops. Although I was part of a community roundtable in Ithaca, a small town in the upstate New York area of the United States, the moment was nonetheless unsettling. Some huge caveats: first, I am a middle-aged white woman and a college professor, albeit an African American Studies scholar from Southern California who has seen and heard some things. Second, I was an invited guest on a community roundtable on Hip Hop and Policing, co-sponsored by Ithaca’s Southside Community Center, the Cornell Hip Hop Collection (CHHC) and the Ithaca College Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, among others. Third, the three cops in question, self-professed hip hop heads, were there voluntarily and explicitly to dialogue about police and community relations, ‘using hip hop music about this topic as the driver of the conversation’, as stated by event organizer, host and assistant archivist of the CHHC Ben Ortiz. Ortiz opened the event with a twenty-minute hip hop playlist of songs referencing police, including ‘Sound of da Police’ by KRS-One, Mos Def’s ‘Mr. Nigga’ and Public Enemy’s ‘Get the Fuck out of Dodge’.

While these three factors tempered my reaction, none of them prevented this listening experience from triggering me. My fear and anger were not motivated by any sense of the music being ‘disrespectful’ to the police officers. Rather, I was distressed by what their reactions might be – and the consequences for the people of colour gathered there that evening, whether in the room or on the street. It had been only a few months since white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, or white police officers Daniel Pantaleo and Justin Damico choked Eric Garner to death on the Staten Island borough of New York City as he wheezed, repeatedly, ‘I Can’t Breathe’. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation that ‘It is no exaggeration to say that the men and women in blue patrolling the streets of the United States have been given a license to kill – and have demonstrated a consistent propensity to use it’ (2016: 2). To cite Ice Cube’s strident lyrics filling the Southside gym that day, ‘A young nigga got it bad ’cause I’m brown / And not the other color, so police think / They have the authority to kill a minority’ (1988). Everyone in that room knew that there would be more deaths in 2015 somewhere in the United States, maybe here. We wanted answers.

Coming of age in Riverside, California, in the 1990s, I learned rather quickly to avoid attention of any kind from cops, even as a white woman. I also learned the devastating lesson about the fragility of my friends and loved ones of colour’s lives in everyday encounters with police. Two people I was close to in my youth – James Martinez (age 21) and Tyisha Miller (age 19) – were killed by Riverside County police in 1997 and 1998, respectively. James was my former high school boyfriend’s cousin; we spent a lot of time laughing and playing
video games together. A drug and gang unit opened fire on him and a friend, Johnny Almendariz (age 18), outside of a party in nearby Home Gardens. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported (Anon. 1997), conflicting reports remain as to whether or not James and Johnny even knew that the cops were there.

Tyisha was a former student in the first high school English Class that I ever taught at age 21. Officers fired at her 24 times as she lay unconscious in her car with the radio on and a gun in her lap, waiting for her cousin to return with help for their flat tyre. They shot her twelve times. Despite widespread outrage and weekly community protests that lasted for months, the Riverside District Attorney eventually cleared the officers of ‘criminal wrongdoing’. They did, however, receive termination notices. Their colleagues on the force responded by shaving their heads in a frightening show of public support; for a moment, a diverse city of over 250,000 people (one well on its way to being ‘majority minority’) was essentially patrolled by armed skinheads. US Representative Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles), still a prominent public force of anti-racist activism, told a crowd of 100 Riverside residents: ‘Police officers who have shaved their heads must be made to understand they are symbols of skinheads […] and they are racist […]They represent what the Ku Klux Klan represents with sheets’. In defiance of reason and their mandate ‘to serve and protect’ the communities that employ them, these police openly denied the painfully obvious historical symbolism of their actions. ‘We’ve done this as a show of solidarity’, said Ron White, member of the Riverside Police Officers Association board of directors, ‘and we take great exception to the suggestion that cutting our hair short is demonstrative of us being white supremacists’.

It was the widely disparate versions of reality that circulated in the wake of James’s and Tyisha’s murders that showed me how racism impacts and shapes our senses at a very fundamental level in the United States – that a sonic colour line impacts what we see, how we hear and who we listen to. How else to account for the quick silencing of witnesses who claimed that the cops never identified themselves at the Home Gardens party, and whose presence could not be detected over the ‘loud music’ that allegedly drew them there in the first place? Or the sickening disparity of skinheads claiming not to be skinheads, who calmly repeated this doublespeak version of reality in national newspapers while callously terrorizing thousands of people with guns and the sheer blunt force of their power to suppress truth with utter impunity? Growing up in Southern California – the land of SWAT, helicopters, CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) units, batter rams and choke holds – I never imagined that I would be sitting on a panel with cops listening to NWA’s ‘Fuck the Police’. Never.

1. KRS-ONE, ‘Sound of da Police’
3. Main Source, ‘Just a Friendly Game of Baseball’
4. Public Enemy, ‘Get the Fuck Out of Dodge’
5. Rebel Diaz, ‘Calma’
6. Prince Paul, ‘Men in Blue’
7. NWA, ‘Fuck the Police’
8. J Dilla, ‘Fuck the Police’
9. Mos Def, ‘Mr. Nigga’
10. Jasiri X, ‘Crooked Cops’
11. G Unit, ‘Ahhh Shit’
12. The Game, ‘Don’t Shoot’

Figure 1: ‘Whoop Whoop is the Sound of the Police’ Playlist, Ben Ortiz, Southside Community Center, Ithaca, New York, 20 February 2015.
This article’s title, ‘Doing fifty-five in a fifty-four’, is an especially critical line taken from rapper Jay-Z’s ‘99 Problems’ (2003), a song from The Black Album. Ortiz used this song in his ‘Hip Hop and Policing’ playlist to relate the experience of (in Jay-Z’s words) ‘being pulled over for no good reason’ (2010: 61). In ‘99 Problems’, Jay-Z re-enacts a tale of a young black man getting pulled over by an older white cop who enforces a nonexistent, arbitrary speed limit. Although the narrator is clearly following the letter of the law, the officer harasses him, a story that Jay-Z recounts by playing both roles in the encounter. Amidst his usual flow, Jay-Z changes his cadence to take on the sound of state-sanctioned white supremacy that he hears in the cop’s voice. I observed this vocal pattern in two other songs that Ortiz played at the community forum: Public Enemy’s ‘Get the Fuck Outta Dodge’ (1991) and the Prince Paul-authored and -produced ‘Men in Blue’ (1999). In each of these songs, male rappers vocally emphasize how cops sound to them; parroting this speech amplifies how white people weaponize their voices in these semi-private encounters to exert unearned racial authority via the sonic colour line.

‘Doing fifty-five in a fifty-four’, therefore, identifies the phenomenon of the ‘cop voice’ and analyses how three male artists have deployed it as a trope in hip hop songs to interrogate police violence in black communities. When rappers re-enact the cadence of white supremacy in their songs, I argue, they use their vocal tone, cadence and timbre to share embodied listening experiences as black men and women. By re-enacting these everyday moments, rappers verbally cite the violence inherent in the masculinist sound of the cop voice itself: the confident, assured violence propelling those aspirant ‘t’s and rounded, hyper-pronounced ‘r’s.

I begin by theorizing the sonic colour line and the listening ear in relation to the sound of whiteness in the voice, something hidden by design and obscured by the tendency of voice and sound studies scholars to locate ‘race’ solely in the presence and perceptions of black and brown voices. Then I perform a sound-centric close reading of cop voice as heard in four hip hop songs and in a brief autoethnographic recounting. Identifying and listening closely to these examples of cop voice reveal how people who are raced as ‘white’ in the United States sound out this subject position in their voices through particular cadences that audibly signify racial authority; this authority stems from the expectation of being listened to – while at the same time, never hearing themselves as doing so.

I want to be clear: while this article’s methodology – grounding my analysis in the particular embodied listening experience of Ortiz’s playlist that prompted a discussion of cop voice – has been generative, I do not intend these male-authored performances to speak for (or over) black women. Ortiz’s collection of all-male voices unintentionally reveals the cultural silence surrounding black women’s experiences of white supremacist violence and the erasure of their witnessing. At the event, Cornell graduate student Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo, aka rapper/producer Sammus, pointed out the ‘overwhelming prevalence of male voices’ that evening, both in the playlist and in the conversation: ‘There are these stories of women being killed […] What is my relationship with the police?’ (quoted in Hernández 2015: n.pag.). Andrea Ritchie argues that we must document and centre women’s experiences of police violence and racial profiling, including sexual abuse and the policing of sexuality, and to note how ‘existing resistance and accountability measures are not designed to detect or address gender-specific forms of law enforcement violence’ (2017: 17). Along with legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw,
Richie co-authored the African American Policy Forum Report Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women. The AAFP and the grassroots #sayhername movement keep the memory of Tyisha and her death alive almost twenty years on, along with the mounting death toll since then, as does Sammus’s song ‘Three Fifths’.1 Black women did that and continue to do that. I hope that the concept of cop voice will prove useful to the growing conversation centreing women of colour’s experiences with policing.2

**THE SONIC COLOUR LINE AND ‘COP VOICE’**

The sonic colour line is the learned cultural mechanism that establishes racial difference through listening habits and uses sound to communicate one’s position vis-à-vis white citizenship. In the United States, the ideology of the sonic colour line operates as an aural boundary: sounds are racialized, naturalized and then policed as ‘black’ or ‘white’. The sonic colour line works in large part by deeming voices shaped by proximity to and experiences of whiteness undetectable as ‘white’ — something perceived to be without race, or ‘normal’, in the perceptions of the white people who wield them. At first, ‘whiteness’ appears inaudible, undetectable as anything other than a sounded marker of normalcy, individual human complexity and ‘proper’ conduct, indeed the very sound of American citizenship itself. This inability to hear whiteness marks the ‘dominant listening ear’ in the United States; it is the nation’s racialized auditory filter.

As African American theorists, writers, artists and musicians – from Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth century to Mendi + Keith Obadike in the present moment – have been reminding us for quite some time, the perceived inaudibility of whiteness does not mean that it has no sonic markers, that it is not heard loud and clear.3 Rather, pervasive white supremacy of the United States demands and depends on socializing white people to perceive these markers as a necessary element of United States national identity itself. Unlike how Americans understand race visually — a mode of representation that traditionally offers up whiteness as negation, as an absence (Dyer 1997) — sounds offers up a sensory feeling of vibrational presence, what Sharon Holland calls ‘the materiality of race’ (2012: 4). Sound very literally touches its listeners, making it a critical medium for race and such a powerful constitutive element of white racial identity because voices and music are cast out, heard, felt and affectively experienced. In other words, ‘looking’ or ‘seeming’ white is not enough, one can – and to achieve full citizenship status, protection and material privileges, one often must – make an audible show of sounding white and engaging with sound via the dominant listening ear: feeling white, and making others feel your whiteness.4 However, ‘our largely segregated society is set up to insulate whites from racial discomfort’ — of being publicly exposed as performing ‘whiteness’ and benefitting from it — and ‘racial hierarchies tell white people that they are entitled to peace and deference’ (Waldman 2018: n.pag.). The entitlement of white ‘peace and deference’ articulates the power dynamic in the intent of cop voice: the expectation of being listened to and of a controlled reaction that highlights whiteness. However, cultural and self-willed ‘insulation’ prevents whites from fully (publicly) recognizing the intent and the agency with which they wield cop voice, ‘Standard English’ and other forms of racialized speech, making these sounds ‘inaudible’ as whiteness to their makers, even as they benefit materially and affectively from it.

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1. In collaboration with Mary Grace Albanese, Alex V. Blue, Maria Chaves Daza, Travis Gosa, Shakira Holt, Angel Lemke, Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo, Curtis Orion, Ben Ortiz, Jessie Reeder and Anton Smith, I compiled a YouTube playlist of hip hop songs by women of colour that represent and reference women’s experiences with police.
2. Access playlist at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_3NpLjzTaydgy7vBG5F2uIgvyN_6jw
3. Sample Tracks:
   - Salt-N-Pepa – ‘Negro Wit’ An Ego’ (1990),
   - BWP – ‘Wanted’ (1991),
   - Lauryn Hill – ‘Black Rage’ (2006),
   - Janelle Monáe – ‘Hell You Talming About’ (2013),
   - Casket Pretty – ‘No Name’ (2016),
   - Moor Mother – ‘Deadbeat Protest’ (2016),
   - Jean Grae/Quelle Chris – ‘Breakfast of Champions’ (2018) and
4. African American scholars and artists working the intersection of race, sound and embodiment include Fred Moten (2003),
   - Alexander Weheliye (2005),
   - Daphne Brooks (2010),
   - Regina Bradley (2012, Forthcoming),
   - Kevin Quasie (2012),
   - Tara Betts (2013),
   - Edwin Hill (2013),
   - Emily Lordi (2013),
   - Shana Redmond (2013),
   - Mendi + Keith Obadike (2014),
   - Louis Chude-Sokei (2015),
   - Carter Mathes (2015),
   - Christina Sharpe (2016),
   - Ashton Crawley (2016),
   - Kristin Moriah (2017),
   - Tina Kampt (2017),
   - Matthew D. Morrison (2017),
   - Alex V. Blue (2017) and
   - Nicole Brittingham Furlonge (2018), among others.
My recent study of race and sound, The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening (2016), puts pressure on whiteness’s alleged inaudibility, theorizing how white supremacy constitutes itself through its own sonic markers and sounded exclusions, sometimes oppressively quiet, often impossibly loud. The sonic colour line, then not only created and regulated so-called ‘black’ sound, but it also deemed certain sounds recognizably and publicly expressive of whiteness and its attendant power in US political, social and economic life. Cop voice is one of these sounds, a specialized weapon in the arsenal that Alex Werth has called the ‘sonic archive of police violence’ in his work on DJ and sound artist King Britt (2017: n.pag.). I define cop voice as the way in which police wield a vocal cadence and tone structured by and vested with white masculine authority, a sound that exerts a forceful, unearned racial authority via the sonic colour line to terrorize people of colour. Intentionally wielded, although allegedly ‘inaudible’ to its users, cop voice almost immediately escalates routine police interactions with people of colour – traffic stops, welfare checks, ‘stop and frisk’ checkpoints and other forms of so-called ‘broken windows’ policing – in ways that deliberately incite terror by communicating to them ‘the larger presumption of guilt from the cradle’, as Jay-Z describes the struggle of black and brown people (2010: 57).

Discussions of cop voice as I define it in existent literature are slim and/or focused on ‘voice’ as a metaphoric entity related to state rhetoric, political force and agenda-setting. Travis Linneman and Don Kurtz examine how certain phrases used by police in rural areas of the US Midwest – ‘slumlords’, ‘people on Welfare’ and the like (2014: 347) – shape policing, but not their sonic delivery. Recent research on sound and policing has tended to focus on audible weaponry such as Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs) (Carr 2017; Tahmahkera 2017; Parker and English 2017). There have been a few published literary references to ‘cop voice’ in literary works that reflect its meaning as a form of audible violence and control, such as K. Kvashay-Boyle’s ‘Not me Shot Dead’, which depicts it as an entity almost of its own: ‘Take a good long look’, says the cop-voice, ‘and we’re just going to swing on by another time here. I’ll keep it nice and slow’ (2007: 137).

In the lyrics that follow, the sonic colour line shapes the cultural codes that make cop voice audible and legible as a white masculine show of force, and helps us understand why there is such a difference in how differently raced populations interpret this sound. Although police claim that asserting their authority via this sound functions to defuse tense situations, it often has the opposite effect on black and brown listeners, escalating encounters towards physical violence and death, while offering up state-sponsored justification for it that is rarely questioned. Police officers in the United States use cop voice to demand often extreme forms of compliance from black and brown Americans, and to communicate whose lives matter.

‘SON, DO YOU KNOW WHY I’M STOPPING YOU FOR?’

As the events of 2016 – and the last 150 years – have taught us, ‘routine’ traffic stops by white cops often have fatal endings for black men and women in the United States. In July, Philando Castile, 32, was shot and killed by Officer Jeronimo Yanez after being pulled over in Falcon Heights, a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota, for a broken tail light; Castile had been explaining that he was licensed to carry a fire arm when Yanez shot him seven times in front
of his girlfriend (who filmed the incident) and her 4-year-old daughter (who huddled in the backseat). In the fourteen years before his death, Castile had been stopped an inordinate and utterly excessive 52 times and charged with 86 violations (McShane 2016). In September 2016, Charlotte, North Carolina police shot and killed Keith Lamont Scott, 43, outside of his car at his own apartment complex, where he had been reading and waiting for one of his children to get home from school. The police maintain that he had a gun and refused to comply with orders to drop the weapon; while a gun was recovered from the scene, it appears in none of the existent footage of the incident, and certainly not anywhere near Scott. Terence Krutcher, 40, was shot and killed by Tulsa Police after officers noticed his car stalled out in the middle of the road; in the footage released just a few days after Scott was killed, Krutcher was shown to be holding his hands up in the air as he walked towards his vehicle (Craven 2016). The Guardian’s database, ‘The Counted’, estimates that 266 black people were killed by police in 2016 alone.7

These are the stakes of this discussion of ‘cop voice’, and of Jay-Z’s 2003 global hit ‘99 Problems’. In his 2010 portrait of the artist Decoded, Jay-Z describes this song as ‘almost a deliberate provocation to simpleminded listeners’ (2010: 55), a ‘not-quite-true story […]’ written from the front seat of a Maxima speeding down the highway with a trunk full of trouble’ sandwiched between ‘incendiary choruses’ and a ridiculously hook-y guitar and cowbell (2010: 57). The ‘not-quite-true’ artistic element of his lyrics allows Jay-Z poetic license to ‘bend language, improvise, and invent new ways of speaking the truth’ for and beyond one’s self (2010: 56). The song in its entirety represents the anxiety of life lived as a hustler, both in the literal form of needing to hustle drugs or whatever you can to make ends meet and the metaphorical but still very material sense of being born black or brown under US racial capitalism, whose systemic oppression ‘and presumption of guilt from the cradle leads you’, as Jay-Z writes in Decoded, ‘to having the crack in the trunk in the first place’ (2010: 57). Amidst the sonic punch of the choruses, exists a brief but important moment when Jay-Z alters his flow to re-sound how the sonic colour line structures black men’s experience of policing in the United States. A rapper’s ‘flow’ sounds their unique rhythm; it is how a rapper chooses to arrange their rhymes in relation to steady rhythm of a song’s beat: sometimes with, sometimes against, sometimes faster than, sometimes slower than, sometimes all of these in the same song. In the passage that follows, Jay-Z audibly slips in and out of cop voice – noted by italics – to inhabit what I call the cadence of white supremacy. Within his flow and in contrast with the song’s beat, Jay-Z performs this cadence as a sonic sleight of voice that reveals hostility and enacts white supremacy by ironically masking it in a deliberately hard-edged casualness and the dynamics of an exaggerated propriety.

I heard ‘Son, do you know why I’m stopping you for?’
Cause I’m young and I’m black and my hat’s real low
Or do I look like a mind reader, sir? I don’t know
Am I under arrest or should I guess some mo?
‘Well you was doing fifty-five in the fifty-four’, uh huh
‘License and registration and step out of the car
‘Are you carrying a weapon on you, I know a lot of you are’
I ain’t stepping out of shit, all my papers legit
‘Well do you mind if I look around the car a little bit?’
Well my glove compartment is locked, so is the trunk and the back

7. See also Napolin (2016) for a discussion of the role of sound in black women’s narration of black men’s death at the hands of police via cell phone videos.
While ventriloquizing the cop’s part in their exchange, Jay-Z flattens out his voice, adding a particular brand of flattened nasality – one distinct from his own already somewhat nasally timbre – and a hint of a Southern accent that contrasts sharply with Jay’s Brooklyn-inflected speech. In addition, he performs the cop’s speech in full sentences and in one breath, rather than his own recognizable stop-and-start, shifting-yet-unstressed flow. Jay-Z is known for unexpected pauses, one-word lines and what Mark Anthony Neal describes in Looking for Leroy as a ‘subdued delivery’; Neal further describes Jay-Z as having a ‘queer flow’ because of his adaptability and discontinuous patterns (2013: 42). By 2003, Jay’s flow was a recognizable aural trademark to fans, allowing him to brusquely slip on and then slough off the cadence of white supremacy in the middle of his song without the exchange between characters becoming indecipherable. Because Jay’s flow is so distinct, the switch is that much more meaningful.

The fact that Jay-Z interweaves the black narrator’s rhymes with the white cop’s lines lyrically wrests the authority from the cop – highlighting both his deft agency and the uniqueness of this exchange. For example, the aural emphasis on the cop’s cadence is amplified by Jay Z’s writing so that the cop’s intrusions never, in and of themselves, make a rhyme. Rather it is the quick and dexterous responses of the man being pulled over that, by and large, finish the rhyme:

‘Well my glove compartment is locked, so is the trunk and the back
And I know my rights so you goin’ need a warrant for that
‘Aren’t you sharp as a tack? You some type of lawyer or something?
Somebody important or something?’
‘Child, I ain’t passed the bar, but I know a little bit
Enough that you won’t illegally search my shit.
‘Well we’ll see how smart you are when the K-9 come’.8

Although Neal notes that ‘some have called [Jay-Z]’s flow lazy’ (2013: 42) in these bars, Jay-Z heightens the laziness of the cop, whose rote cadence expresses confidence through boredom, assurance through recitation, the aural trappings of ideology propelling the cop’s voice and performing the real fact that his white masculine deputized authority is all that is needed to make the ‘alternative facts’ of ‘doing fifty-five in a fifty-four’ hold true in court. As Jay-Z annotates in Decoded, ‘this dialogue is about the tension between a cop who knows that legally he’s dead wrong for stopping someone with no probable cause other than race, and a narrator who knows he’s dead wrong for moving the crack’ (2010: 61). His shifts in voice heighten the song’s narrative and affective tension, and the violence of the cop’s professional threats. Lyrically, the end of the song is ambiguous; listeners are left to imagine what happens if and when the K-9 unit arrives with its drug-sniffing dogs.

The contrast in the interplay between the white cop and the black driver highlights the racial scripting inherent in the cop’s rhythmic vocal aggression.
Jay-Z’s performance of this cop marshals the sound of whiteness, and involves accent, tone and grain – but it is more than these things, and yet all of these things at once. It is a cadence, an ideologically rhythmic iteration of white supremacy in the voice, one that surrounds, animates and shapes speech. Jay-Z’s lyrical and vocal performance of cop voice embodies and deliberately grinds against the edge of the sonic colour line, calling attention to it and enacting its relations of power by inhabiting whiteness with audible masculine swagger and expectation of immediate obedience.

The cadence of white supremacy, therefore, sonifies the deep and longstanding history of racialized policing in the United States, one that the sonic colour line enables and the listening ear knowingly disavows as ‘neutral’ and normalized as ‘procedure’, aligning the sonic and visual codes of race. What Jay-Z calls the ‘cat-and-mouse game’ of the dialogue that the two men play out (2010: 61) reveals how white performance of the cop voice is the latest performative historical substitution – or surrogation, as Joseph Roach calls it in Cities of the Dead (1996) – in a long line of vocal white supremacist power plays invoking the sonic colour line dating back to slavery. Bryan Wagner traces the historical connections between ‘Overseers’ and ‘officers’ in Disturbing the Peace, where he shows continuity between ‘the formal relationships between town councils and their slave patrols, [which] in many municipalities, established the blueprint for modern policing in the region’ (2009: 50). Bronx rapper KRS-One also sonically signals the connections between police power and the social relations of slavery in his 1993 song ‘Sound of Da Police’ when he asks listeners to perform an exercise with him, chanting the word ‘Overseer’ faster and faster until it aurally blends into and becomes the word ‘officer’.

Jay-Z’s ‘99 Problems’ also signifies on history, lyrically and sonically referencing an earlier song representing an exchange between a white cop and a black man: Public Enemy’s 1991 song ‘Get the Fuck Outta Dodge’ (GTFOD). In this song, rapper Chuck D narrates a story about what has long been colloquially called ‘driving while black’ in the United States – essentially, ‘doing 55 in a 54’. But in this case, the song’s narrator is aurally profiled as a criminal because he is ‘wheeling with the boom in the back’ (aka playing bass-driven hip hop while driving around New York City). The police officer in ‘GTFOD’ uses sound itself as ‘probable cause’, the sonic colour line demarcating hip hop as ‘black music’, and black music as ‘noise’ that always already disturbs the peace, an issue that Public Enemy raised in their 1987 song ‘Bring the Noise’. Unlike the racially coded, ventriloquized back-and-forth that takes place in ‘99 Problems’, the cop voice in ‘GTFOD’ asserts itself via a monologue delivered by UK rapper True Mathematics (from Hempstead). Deliberately sounding off his game, True Math steps in to take on the predatory persona of:

Sgt. Hawkes and I’m down wit’ the cop scene
I’m a rookie and I’m rollin’ wit’ a SWAT team
Packin’ a nine can’t wait to use it
Crooked cop yeah that’s my music
Up against the wall don’t gimme no lip son
A bank is robbed and you fit the description
And I ain’t your mama and I ain’t your pops
Keep your music down or you might get shot
This is a warning so watch your tail
Or I’m a have to put your ass in jail
I’m the police and I’m in charge
You don’t like it get the fuck outta Dodge

While I am less familiar with Math’s oeuvre, in the context of the song – featuring Chuck D’s animated, explosive vocal dynamics and his trademark call-and-response with Flavor Flav – Math seems to give us the most basic of rhymed couplets in a pronounced ‘American’ accent. A couple of decades later, progressive US Americans would come to mock this as a “‘Merican accent’, an indication of this sound’s association with racism and violence (OED Online 2017). Math’s representation of cop voice sonically signifies a dangerously blind obedience to white masculine nationalism, particularly in white rural and/or working-class communities, and its dependence on violence against black and brown people and assumption of an entitlement to being ‘crooked’ without consequences. Named after a predatory animal, Officer Hawkes delivers murderous threats in a simple sing-song iambic pentameter, which Public Enemy’s producers The Bomb Squad filter through a megaphone, giving this segment the sonically echoing imagery of riot gear. The mechanized sound is also reminiscent of the constant squelching of police officer’s radios, part of the soundscape of policing that militarizes cop voice and amplifies the extreme power imbalance between the two men.

Finally, producer Prince Paul’s ‘Men in Blue’ from 1999’s A Prince Among Thieves offers an ironic take on the cadence of supremacy. In ‘Men in Blue’, underground rapper Breezly Brewin of the Bronx rappers The Juggaknots takes on the role of ‘Tariq’ – a name suggestive of black Muslim identity – to white rapper Everlast’s ‘Officer O’Malley Bitchkowski’. Pairing Everlast, then the front man for the Irish hip hop outfit House of Pain, with the parodic name Officer O’Malley Bitchkowski emphasizes the genealogy of white European ethnic immigrants (Irish and Polish in particular) that took on police work, maximizing the privileges of white American citizenship by oppressing people of colour. The song opens with Everlast sonifying the cop voice by adopting the familiar, recited rhythm of the Miranda rights – theoretically featured in every US arrest since the 1966 case Arizona vs. Miranda mandated a warning regarding the ‘right to silence’ guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution. Everlast rhymes:

You have the right to remain silent. Anything
You say can and will be twisted around and used
Against you in the court of law I’ll make damn
Fuckin’ sure of it! You have the right to an attorney
If you cannot afford an attorney which
You probably can we will be provided for you
You stupid freakin’, moulinyan bastard!

The familiar Miranda opening lulls the ear into submission, as most US Americans have heard this before, either first-hand or through numerous televised procedural dramas, and they think that they know what will follow. However, Everlast’s breaks from the script to offer an unhinged suburban rant, an aural representation of the cadence of white supremacy that builds from the crisp, exaggerated politeness of Jay-Z’s cop and heightens the blunt directness of Public Enemy’s Sgt. Hawkes. The result reveals just how quickly the decorum of cop voice can fall way, exposing the racial slurs and white supremacist power dynamics vibrating just underneath. The cop calls the narrator a
'moulinyan’, –‘eggplant’ in Italian – a racial slur towards black people used by white ethnics in the United States, particularly Italian Americans in New York City. The terminology and the round enunciation of his delivery signals Prince Paul’s critique of a particular white ethnic group’s role in reproducing racial inequities in New York via policing, one played out with frightening efficacy in 2014 when a bystander filmed Eric Garner, a 43-year-old African American man, being choked to death by Italian American NYPD officers Daniel Pantaleo and Justin Damico in Staten Island, as they arrested him for a very low-level crime (selling single [aka ‘loose’] cigarettes without tax stamps). Everlast here exaggerates his own suburban accent – he hails from the Village of Valley Stream in Long Island, New York – in his representation of cop voice to interrogate how the cadences of white supremacy are classed and raced. Basically, there is nothing essentially biologically ‘white’ or ‘male’ about the cadences of cop voice, and both are heard and sounded through ethnic and class identities.

LISTENING TO MYSELF LISTEN: COP VOICE AND THE ‘WHITE GIRL PASS’

Reflecting on how rappers sound the cop voice in these three songs – both here in the community conversation in Ithaca – caused me to consider how my own life experience brought me to these realizations and how my embodiment matters in how I listen through and to the sonic colour line. The live experience of listening in Ithaca’s Southside Community Center amplified my unearned race and class privilege and its intersections with gender that – no matter what my political, affective or familial affiliations – theoretically proffered me safe passage via America’s systemic white supremacist patriarchy. Racial inequality in the United States utterly depends on the assumption that white women are both to be protected from harm but also, simultaneously, buffered from the knowledge that their whiteness, rather than their humanity, confers upon them such unearned and unequal protection under the law. Robin DiAngelo uses the evocative phrase ‘protective pillows’ to describe this phenomenon (2011: 55), the felt but deliberately unseen ‘resources and/or benefits of the doubt’ that confer upon white people both a highly racialized safety and a ‘psychic freedom’ from race.

In my old neighbourhood in the 1980s and the 1990s, we cut to the chase and called such entitlement the ‘white girl pass’, a deceptively simple phrase rich with symbolism and signification. It referred to the way in which US racial hierarchies give white girls a ‘pass’ in terms of the daily fear, stress and worry of encountering or even thinking about racism, but it also evoked a school’s ‘hall pass’, which freed you from the institutionalized surveillance and scrutiny of campus cops. Folks would joke, rather seriously, that a brown girl or boy who happened to be rolling with a white girl might get a reprieve – a ‘pass’ – from the violence normally meted out by other white people. This did not always work, of course; sometimes violence was amplified because of perceived racial transgression and/or traitorousness. This nonetheless underscored that – to use our urgent contemporary political terminology – the lives of white girls so obviously matter in the United States (as to not even warrant saying so), but they also had agency. Their voices mattered. White girls could witness violence, and talk, and tell, and testify, and expect that other (white) people would listen. Therefore, cops just might act accordingly, irrespective of dashcams or a bystander with a video camera.

When collected together and played aloud for concentrated listening in a room full of police, various rappers’ narration of police encounters brought me
back, quite viscerally, to the first time that I heard the real-life cop voice that white officers use on black and brown men. And I say this with sarcasm and with truth: it is not a sound meant for white girls’ racially fragile ears. Hearing it permanently changed the way I listen, and the memory as sharp as it has ever been. I was 21 years old and sitting in the parking lot of a local dance club with two male friends visibly presenting as Latino. We were all legally able to drink in the state of California, but were trying to save a little money by drinking our own beer rather than the club’s overpriced selection. Suddenly there was a rap on the passenger-side window and a light directly in our faces, followed swiftly by cop voice. He lit into my friends, saying terrible and terrifying things, although the way in which he spoke them was equally frightening if not more so: the aggressive tone, the staccato rhythm, the dehumanizing sound of rote bureaucratic coldness mixed with obviously-there-but-not-officially-there rage. He interrogated us as if we were caught committing murder rather than trying to save a few dollars.

But I only momentarily thought that he was interrogating ‘us’, because after I deliberately stirred in the back seat the ‘white girl pass’ kicked in. I realized that the cop had not seen that I was there until that moment, upon which his entire demeanour changed. The cop shined the light in my face, and when he saw that there was a white girl in the backseat, importantly one who had been listening the entire time. I cannot emphasize how instantaneously he shifted from cop voice into something else altogether, a cross between a concerned parent and a guidance counsellor. This shift crystallized three things: 1) that cop voice can be put on and taken off abruptly, and at will, 2) that the cop never considered me a perpetrator despite also being caught in the act and 3) that me being there and overhearing this exchange meant that my friends would emerge from the car and this moment safe, alive and at least physically unscathed. As one of my involved friends mentioned in recent correspondence about this event: ‘It was a common occurrence for me in those days. I will say that it was always a different story if there was a girl involved though. Things usually went very differently otherwise’. I remember noticing how the screwed-up muscles in the cop’s face relaxed as his tone shifted from hyped-up Robocop to scolding dad. Suddenly he was helping us pour out the alcohol and wishing us a good night, telling us ‘young people’ to be more careful and to make better choices, all with a slight jaunt in his voice. We stole glances at each other out of the corners of our widened eyes as we showed our IDs, got our black-light ink hand stamps and went in to dance. By performing two contrasting yet intimately connected cadences of whiteness in his voice – signifying the violent threat undergirding institutionalized racial supremacy in the United States and the comforting familiarity of perceived belonging through shared whiteness – the cop enacted the sonic colour line in deafening relief. I heard it performed over and over again by rappers featured in Ortiz’s playlist.

**WHEN A POLICE OFFICER SPEAKS IN THE FIELD, CAN THEY HEAR THEMSELVES?**

At the community discussion in Ithaca, I asked the three officers on the panel whether they had picked up on those moments where cop voice interrupted the rappers’ flows and whether they heard themselves and their colleagues in the rappers’ representations of cops’ tone and cadence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, each of the men responded ‘no’. What they reported hearing in these
ventriloquized versions of the cop voice was (in both the songs and in their everyday policing) an attempt by the proper authority to ‘de-escalate’ a situation that they perceived as already violent. They did not perceive their own voices or the accompanying sounds of police presence – sirens, helicopters, voices – as an ‘escalation’. They located any and all forms of violence as always already in the suspects’ bodies, and repeatedly assumed a refusal to comply. The officers repeated – almost verbatim according to my notes – two telling statements: ‘we do not receive much training in community relations, we receive many more hours on the gun range’ – which, thankfully, they were bothered by – and ‘we are trained that everybody is a potential suspect’. The latter is a disturbing statement in and of itself, but even more so when ‘everybody’ is predominantly black and brown in the United States, unlike its police force, which remained 73 per cent white as of 2015. What does it mean, then, that potentially 73 per cent of the US police force cannot hear its own aggression?

The cop voice is especially insidious then, because it performs the conditions for its alleged necessity, often before the suspect ever opens their mouth or hears their right to remain silent. Irrespective of the context or what is actually said, the cadence of white supremacy does not just speak to black people, it speaks of them, invoking painful pasts, a dangerous present and future that suddenly contracts, recedes and fades. It’s ‘the way little moments’, Jay-Z writes, ‘can suddenly turn into life-or-death situations’ (2010: 57). Identifying and really listing to cop voice and the cadence of white supremacy from multiple perspectives is absolutely critical at a time when the United States is once again erupting in racist violence and facing a criminal justice epidemic of epic proportions. The United States accounts for just 5 per cent of the world’s population but 25 per cent of the global prison population, but the crisis is more than excessive rates of incarceration; it is racist perception coupled with state-sponsored impunity. ‘The perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, and exempt from empathy, solidarity, or basic humanity’, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor notes, ‘is what allows the police to kill Black people with no threat of punishment’ (2016: 3). Cop voice is the gateway sound that reminds people of colour of this fact, and also a form of escalation that attempts to push a traffic stop to that point.

As Claudia Rankine writes in the epigraph with which I framed this article: ‘there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description’. This description is quite literally called into being via the sound of cop voice. The cadence of white supremacy hails ‘one guy’ and sonifies the process through which he becomes ‘always the guy’. The cover of the collection of poems from which it is taken, Citizen: An American Lyric (Rankine 2014), visually represents how the cadence of white supremacy hails, sounds out and eventually hollows out black manhood; it features an empty, deconstructed black hood, suspended in mid-air as a haunting homage to Trayvon Martin, the young man killed by white ‘neighborhood watch’ vigilante George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, as Martin walked home to his dad’s house carrying Skittles and an Arizona Ice Tea. The audio files of Zimmerman’s cell phone call to 911 in fact show him deputizing himself by mobilizing cop voice to the operator. ‘We’ve had some break ins in my neighborhood’, Zimmerman reports slowly, and with the authoritative and entitled expectation to be heard and automatically believed; follows up with: ‘and there’s a real suspicious guy […] this guy looks like he is up to no good’. There is only one guy who is always the guy.
Admittedly, the three police officers who I spoke with in Ithaca in 2015 were a very small and localized sample – and unusual in that they were interested in and open to talking about sound, race and policing with me when I asked them about cop voice that evening. However, their public responses nonetheless reveal how the ideology of white supremacy sounds when vocally embodied and how the sonic colour line structures various listening experiences. Amplifying multiple listening experiences exposes cop voice as far from a neutral assertion of authority, but an aural link to a long, brutal history that the white listening ear tunes out and deliberately mishears under the cover of colourblindness. How cops speak and to whom is the front line of American citizenship and racial inequity, and, all too often, a thin line between who lives and who dies.

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Emceeing. DJing. Breaking. Graffiti. Hip-hop is commonly understood to consist of these four elements. The idea of four elements is one of hip-hop culture’s core narrative and most pervasive founding myth since its beginnings in the Bronx in the 1970s. Yet, the idea of four core elements has been highly contested since the beginning of the culture as there is no unified definition of how many elements exist, who defined them, and how they came together.

The second meeting of the European HipHop Studies Network therefore explores one of hip-hop’s most central ideas, the ideas of elements: Who defines them? What do they tell us about cultural, social, and economic communities and boundaries across Europe? How do these limits vary according to various contexts and practices across Europe? What are their consequences for cultural production and consumption? The objective of the meeting is to trace, interrogate, and expand the notion of elements as central organizing principles in hip-hop culture and their variations across Europe.

We invite papers, panels, performances, and contributions from a wide variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and angles. Scholarly disciplines include but are not limited to art history, cultural studies, black studies, ethnography, geography, graffiti studies, literary studies, musicology, pedagogy, performance studies, philosophy, political science, sociology, and visual culture studies. Artistic contributions include performances, themed panels of any format, lecture-recitals, and philosophies which combine research and praxis (or practice-as-research).

Artistic and scholarly proposals engaging with European hip-hop’s elements (those based both in Europe and outside of it) should include a title, 250 word abstract of their contribution and short biographical sketch. This should be submitted to hiphopnetworkeurope@gmail.com no later than 31 January 2019. We especially welcome papers that engage with less-academically-visible work, and from artists and practitioners from a wider variety of backgrounds. We hope to see you in Bristol!