

**BLACKS' PROTEST SONGS:  
THE EXPRESSION OF LYNCHING AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM  
IN THE USA**

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**Abstract**

The protest has become the main, dominant inner-structure, and predominant theme not only in black writings, but also in the song writings. The protest is rooted in black slavery and racism has been felt and may continue to be felt throughout U.S. history. This article sought to indicate the mode of racism and ways of black in resisting it reflected in three protest songs written by blacks. Looking at the three decades of protest songs, three are standing out as important examples for this study: “*Strange Fruit*” (1937), “*Say It, I’m Black and I’m Proud*” (1968), and “*Blue Lights*” (2018). These protest songs are consistent in messaging the racism in the criminal justice system and black resistance against it over time. Critical race theory enables how racism as a legal, cultural, and political condition is reproduced and maintained, primarily in the US context. *Strange Fruit* portrays about lynching in the era of Jim Crow. They were tortured and lynched, reflecting how black people were experiencing discriminatory treatments and extrajudicial punishment after the civil war. *Say It, I’m Black and I’m Proud* portrays racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights Movement. Whites are still privileged and blacks are undervalued. More advances, *Blue Lights* portrays the concern of black people in facing racism that affects institutions like law enforcement, which leads to arbitrary shooting of black people in crime scenes in the present time. Taken together, the songs reflect the dynamic nature of racism, as well as the shifting mode and attitude of blacks in struggling against racism from the past up to the present time in the US from passive, radical, and subtler

**Keywords:** Racism, Critical Race Theory, Protest Songs, Criminal Justice System

**INTRODUCTION**

Most of the U.S people believe that the legacy of slavery continues to have an impact on the position of black people in American society today, though slavery has been abolished more than a hundred years past (Horowitz, Brown And Cox, 2019). People see that America hasn’t made enough progress against racial inequality, and even there is some cynicism, particularly among blacks. They assumed that they will never have equal rights in America and racism will continue to be haunted blacks and Americans, and has been a problem ever since.

Racial biases against blacks are still apparent today, particularly in the criminal justice system. Blacks are treated less fairly than whites dealing with, white mob and police brutality in the criminal justice system. The election of the black President, Barack Obama, in the 21st century, could not give more progress on equality, in fact, it was and still far from the “promised land” (Allen, 2020), that the strength America as a nation, and how can it heal the divisions, and make democracy work for everyone.

The experience of black in the criminal justice system has been recorded in American history. Equal Justice Initiative (2020) reported that after slavery was ended in 1865, specifically in the Southern states, but blacks encompassed criminal justice as a means of racial control that originated from laws that so-called 'Black Codes'. Black Codes in the antebellum South were the laws that strongly controlled and regulated the activities and behavior of blacks, especially free blacks, who were not considered citizens. Black Codes at the time-restricted blacks' freedom, and forced them to work for low salaries (Kent, 1932; Blackmon, 2008). Ranney (2006: 15) added that all Southern states imposed at least minimal limits on slave punishment, for example, by making murder or life-threatening injury of slaves a crime, and a few states allowed slaves a limited right of self-defense. As slaves could not use the courts or sheriff or give testimony against a white man, practicing these meant little. After the civil war, the law led to the imprisonment of unprecedented numbers of Black men, women, and children, who were returned to slavery-like conditions, or what Blackmon (2008) says it as slavery by another name, through forced labor and condemn hiring systems that lasted well into the 20th century.

Black Codes have been ratified through several amendments, such a the 14th promotes “equal protection” and the 15th that guarantees citizen's right to vote would not be denied on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, civil rights movement, until the election Barack Obama as president of the United States as the black generation, racism remains in America. In its history, efforts to implement laws for social equality in America have always been overshadowed by the emergence of efforts to defend white supremacy. In the reconstruction era of the 1870s, the Ku Klux Klan organization appeared in the reconstruction era, and in the early twentieth century, the Jim Crow laws emerged that carried the idea of racial segregation. Even up to the declaration of human rights, policies to combat racial inequality have not targeted criminal justice, where outcomes are still impacted by the same racial bias and inequality that pervade American society. Mass incarceration today stands as a legacy of past abuses and continues to limit opportunities in the nation’s most vulnerable communities. The Criminal Justice System has become a legal platform to

control and regulate the actions and behavior of black people in the United States. Williams (1995: 537) cites the views of Jeanette Covington in *Racial Classification in Criminology: The Reproduction of Racialized Crime*, that the classification of criminal behavior in racial terms lies in the emergence of believed statements about black people. The emergence of this truth underlines that the racialization of crime projects is an idea that considers black people as a social category consisting of individuals with a homogeneous pattern of criminal behavior. The social categories with a homogeneous pattern of criminal behavior are assigned to black people as the impact of past regulations in the black codes.

It is not surprising if incidents of shootings that were carried out by the police against black citizens who were deemed to have committed crimes emerged lately. The latest incident that occurred to George Floyd who died at the hands of the police on charges of unsubstantiated theft is one of a series of proofs of how strong racism afflicts black Americans in America. The attention on the harsh treatment of black Americans in the criminal justice system in the present time started back in 2014 since Michael Brown was killed (Department of Justice, 2015), actually is a product of history. A shocking number have been killed in encounters with police, in the year since Ferguson and in the years before. Besides that, thousands more have suffered subtler forms of discrimination in the criminal justice system, where social science research shows striking racial disparities at nearly every level—from arrest rates, to bail amounts, to sentence lengths, to probation hearing outcomes.

This article would indicate how racism was perceived by Black in the Criminal Justice system through the black expression in the protest songs. Lislle (2017) stated that, for black, the song has been evolved with the historical events of the United States and then gave birth to freedom songs or protest songs. Social movements induced transformations of the sounds and the lyrics of the oppressed black community into a more proud one, willing to fight against discrimination, racism, and segregation. Music, then, appeared as a political discourse which quitted to its role of entertainment mean (Abdullah, 2009) to become more rebellious. It also more has been used to affirm their identity, assert their cultural differences, and demand equal rights in the United States (Leslie, 2017). Besides being emphasized as a window onto the making and the meaning of both American culture and African American culture (Martin, 2005: 199), black music then was fed by solitude, racism, and injustices (Lislle, 2017).

Three songs that to be the object of discussion in this article are, *Strange Fruit*, a song performed most famously by Billie Holiday, who first sang and recorded it in 1939. The song continues to be covered by numerous artists and has inspired novels, other poems, and other

creative works. In 1978, Holiday's version of the song was inducted into the *Grammy Hall of Fame*. It was also included in the list of *Songs of the Century*, by the Recording Industry of America and the *National Endowment for the Arts*. It was also dubbed "a declaration of war ... the beginning of the civil rights movement" (New York Times, 2000). The second song is *Say It, I'm Black and I'm Proud*, performed by James Brown and written with his bandleader Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis in August 1968. This song addresses prejudice against black people and communities in America, and the need for black empowerment (Chronicles, 1970). Third, *Blue Lights* is a song by English singer-songwriter Jorja Smith. It was released as her debut single on 26 February 2018. This song was written by Jorja herself, including several songwriters. This song concerns the guilty conscience that black people experience once police officers are in their sight. Prejudices against black people are inevitable in nowadays society, and Jorja wanted to question the issue of this song. This song has been nominated for several awards as Best Song, Best Urban Video, and Best Contemporary Song, and won UK Music Video Awards in 2018.

It seems that the three black protest songs mentioned are consistent messaging the brutality of criminal justice system toward black people in the United States and their resistance against the racism. Looking at the era of the song released, three protest songs have not changed much of the lyrics content regarding the racism in criminal justice system, but the way they responded to racism are changed as well as the way they see themselves and self. The evolution of racism and black discourse toward a more engaged discourse in protest songs is studied as well.

Critical race theory is used as a tool to discern the problem of racism and its evolution in American criminal justice system reflected in Blacks' protest songs. Dela Garza & Ono (2016) stated that Critical race theory (CRT) is an intellectual movement that seeks to understand how white supremacy as a legal, cultural, and political condition is reproduced and maintained, primarily in the US context. It is part of a much longer research tradition investigating race and racism, and distinguishes itself as an approach that originated within legal studies (in part building from and responding to critical legal studies); aims to be a vehicle for social and political change; has been adopted interdisciplinary across many fields, including perhaps most notably education; and, in certain contexts, has come to be the umbrella term for studies of race and racism generally. Another aspect to CRT is its emphasis on the real-world effects of race and racism. So, while CRT explicitly challenges racist discourse, it is also crucially aware of the way race and racism affect the bodies, identities, and experiences of people of color in the USA.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### The Lynching Portrayed in *Strange Fruit* Song

*The Strange Fruit* tells the story of the punishment experienced by Black during the Jim Crow era, known as Lynching. Lynching is a practice of extrajudicial punishment and an informal public execution that the victims used to be ended up by hanged in the tree. Black who became victims of lynching were never tried to prove their guilt, and some who were innocent were also punished. It is prejudice that brings black people to lynching condemnation. In *Strange Fruit*, the practice of lynching is analogous to a tree with strange fruit. The fruit in question hung onto the top of the poplar tree, with rancid-smelling blood splashing on the leaves and roots of the tree. The strange fruit was none other than the body of a black person who was executed on a gallows and left to be blown away and eaten by vultures. This situation implies a terrifying terror and heartlessness in societal life. The following is the lyric of the song *Strange Fruit*.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees (line 1-4)

Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh (line 5-8)

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop (line 9-12)

The lyrics of the song are consisted of 12 lines that divided into three stanzas. In the first stanza, the lyrics of the songs illustrated the face of lynching through the symbol of Southern trees, blood, poplar trees, and black bodies swinging and breeze. The title of '*Strange fruit*' is coined a metaphor juxtaposed to the victims of lynching, those blacks, hanged on trees as if they were dying fruits that were bore from the lynching is presented symbolically, but the location are pointed clearly. That is, in the South. Southern trees means the trees in the plantation of the South that identical to agricultural life from the 17th into the 20th century (Sellers,1950: 19). Plantations had become an important aspect of the History

of the Southern United States, particularly the antebellum era (pre-American Civil War). Plantation then has created a civilization and society in the Southern of the U.S not only architecture and landscape, but also a way of living.

The vision of blood portrays bloodshed prior to the actual lynching. This is not only portraying about how there is not only blood at leaves from black victims that have been lynched, how their bodies drop bloods, but also symbolically dealing with the circular life of black in the USA, what they have given to the state and what they deserved. The blood described as being at the root and leaves means blood is giving the tree life instead of water. Blacks' blood have watered the the southern trees and giving hydration to them. The Southern trees' fruit then cultivated also the dead black body. This is a rather remarkable parable to show how Southerners treated black people unfairly and cruelly. Since Slaves were brought to America in 1619, blacks have done many great jobs to make America a great nation. Kathryn (2010) stated that without enslavement, America wouldn't grow as successful as it is now. Enslaved black workers built U.S; its roads, buildings, infrastructures, performing labor and so on. Southern states was thriving back then because of slavery. They heavily relied on cotton industry in which the blacks as labor, and the industry was very profitable. 'Blood at the root' implies how United States was built by suffering, enslavement, and exploitation. 'The trees' are fed by bloods of innocents, victims, causalities.

'*Black bodies*' in line 3 is denotatively referred to a Black Americans. 'Swinging in the southern breeze' could also imply how Black Americans are hopeless against the brutal treatment towards their race; they're just swinging, following the Southern mob law. They have no control over their selves, the white control them. refers to the bodies of black Americans are hanged on the trees and being left outside without proper burial. This line portrays how gruesome the treatment towards Blacks on the lynching back then. By hanging and showing the bodies, white Americans expect to spread terror to the society especially blacks, legitimizing their power that rules the society in different layers of economic, social, and politic.

"*the poplar trees*" in line 4 refers to the species of Populus Genus, referring to cottonwood, the aspens, and the balsam poplars (Britanica, 2020). It literally translates to the dark past that poplar trees were used to lynch black people in the South. In ancient Greek mythology poplar trees were associated with the symbol of death. Hence, The poplar trees were used to slaughter black people. *Strange fruit* is used to point out black victims of lynching, remembering how they are hanged, rotted, die, and eventually plucked off in the Southern life. "*Pastoral scene of the gallant south*" (line 5) is become a strong ironic

criticism of the gap between the South's perception of its own culture and the reality of that culture. Southern lifestyle was referring to countryside and its peacefulness, the landscape as well as traditions – those famous Southern manners, the dignified rural plantation life, and the gallantry of South. The gallant of the south can also be found in Southern fiction, like *Gone With The Wind*, that tended to glorify the South with its plantation, natural landscape, as culture as well (Rasiah, 2014; Rasiah 2017 Rasiah, 2020). It also painted the Antebellum South, where plantation owners ruled as a sort of aristocracy, and society was thought to be based on chivalric ideas. However, the gallantry of South was built nothing but from exploitation and horrible discrimination against Blacks has become the cultural identity of the South. This is proved by the depiction of the white joy in witnessing the hanging black body in the trees as stated in the line 6 “*The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth*”. Lynching became an entertainment; it was publicity to the society.

Lynching was conducted as a form of celebratory of white supremacy and racial control and domination. In addition, segregation was not just only about legitimizing white supremacy, in society, but also how it was a scheme for sustaining racial control of African-Americans, not solely served as an extrajudicial punishment for criminals. This portrays how perpetuation of racial inequality completed the governance of white domination and supremacy in the society of U.S.

Jim Crow laws endorsed racial segregation against African-Americans. In practice, Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the states (0). Jim Crow laws as the continuation of black codes damaged lives of black people and their existence in society. These laws created more discriminatory treatments towards Black Americans because they were considered to be different from the white. The clause ‘here is fruit for the crows’ depicts hopelessness and helplessness of Black Americans facing Jim Crow laws because these laws were created by the systemic racism that put black people into disadvantages like separation of white and colored people that eventually lead to the occurrence of lynching of African-Americans. Williams (2020) said that lynching claimed the lives of nearly 5,000 individuals between 1891 and 1968—most of them Black, in some instances Black men had their genitals hacked off for the amusement of gathering crowds; mothers and sons were hung together, pregnant Black women had their babies murdered and carved from their wombs as they hung. And yet, the nation still has not made it a federal crime. It is because in fact, racism has been entrenched into the society of America, which causes cruel discriminatory treatments like lynching to be considered normal. Bitterness here could also portray resentment of black people to the governance of U.S. knowing that there

will never be an apology for slavery and lynching as the sins of the past. Lynching has dehumanized black. They can be described as the denial of full humanness to others, and the cruelty and suffering that accompany it (Nick, 2006:252). Equal Justice Initiative (2017) added that during the period between the Civil War and World War II, thousands of Blacks were lynched and been traumatic for Black people throughout the country. Ironically that violent and public act of torture is largely tolerated by state and federal officials.

### **Black Pride in *Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud* Song**

*Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud* is a landmark and a very groundbreaking song. It concerns basically beside to reflect of racism also express about black pride that is a message to all black people out there to stand for their rights as human beings. It is an anthem of black power movement that used to teach pride and self-proud of being black and lifted downtrodden black communities back in 1960s.

This song expresses the stereotypical relationship between black people that was built in the discourse of racism which has become a source of torture for them both physically and mentality in America. Thomas (in Rasiah, 2020) stated these black and blackness values not only mark their physical identity, but also their historical aspects. The identity of black and blackness is associated with their geographic origins on African soil and is often connoted with the Dark Continent which has black people, black attitudes and ideas. Black then marks the racial identity code for black people which creates stereotypes as a code of identity and bad behavior for black people in America. The song "Say It-I'm Black and I'm Proud" reflects on the experiences of black people in the civil rights movement's declaration era and beyond. While the movement was gaining momentum, it seemed that racism against blacks was showing no signs of being progressive. Attempts to discriminate against and commit violence against black people still occur in society by blowing up the issue of black crime or non-compliance. "*Say It-I'm Black and I'm Proud*" – James Brown

Uh! Your bad self!

Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud

Say it louder! I'm black and I'm proud

Look a-here!

Some people say we got a lot of malice, some say it's a lotta nerve (line 5)

But I say we won't quit movin' until we get what we deserve

We've been buked and we've been scoured

We've been treated bad, talked about as sure as you're born

But just as sure as it take two eyes to make a pair, huh!

Brother we can't quit until we get our share (line 10)

Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud  
Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud  
One more time, say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud, huh!

I've worked on jobs with my feet and my hands  
But all the work I did was for the other man (line 15)  
And now we demands a chance to do things for ourselves  
We tired of beatin' our head against the wall  
An' workin' for someone else

Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud  
Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud (line 20)  
Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud  
Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud, oh!

Ooh-wee, you're killin' me  
Alright, uh, you're out of sight!  
Alright, so tough you're tough enough! (line 25)  
Ooh-wee uh! you're killin' me! oow!

Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud  
Say it louder! I'm black and I'm proud

Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves  
We tired of beatin' our heads against the wall (line 30)  
And workin' for someone else look a-here  
There's one thing more I got to say right here  
Now, now we're people, we're like the birds and the bees  
We rather die on our feet than keep livin' on our knees

Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud huh! (line 35)  
Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud huh!  
Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud Lord-a, Lord-a, Lord-a  
Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud, ooh!

Uh! alright now, good God  
You know we can do the boogaloo

This song links the image of blacks as bad human beings with the justification of their cruelty. “Uh! Your *bad self!*” (line 1) is a short slang for a complete expression “Go on with your bad self”, meaning ‘keep doing what you are doing; you are looking good and you are fine’. This utterance actually dealt with the stereotypical image of black in the united states that they are a low primate creature

In African American use of English, or commonly known as Black English, or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), words sometimes have intentional inverted meanings. In African American English, ‘bad’ means ‘exceptionally good’, goes the same with ‘sick’, means ‘awesome’. This portrays a message of encouragement towards black people in facing racial identity issues in society. This line suggests black people to be who they are because they are looking good and fine regardless of their skin color, just the way they are. This implies that black people were still facing racial discrimination by just how they look and ‘color’ differently from others, or to say the least, their physical appearance and attributes.

*“Look-a here!”* (line 4) means that James Brown, as a singer and songwriter of his very own song, wanted to grab the attention of all black people. This could be interpreted as how black people’s attention has been distracted over something else, in example, their condition in the unjust society. Through this line, he wanted to encourage black people, over all of this oppression that they feel, they have to be proud of themselves of being black.

*“Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud”* (line 2)

The use of call-and-response style in this song represents the culture of black people in black spiritual and gospel tradition. But, this line is not merely a call-and-response style, but together, these eight words create a deeper meaning towards black people’s lives on the era. This line proclaims self-confidence and assertiveness of being black in the society where white rule. Black people had been frightened by the fact that they were racially different from white people. They were scared by how they would be treated in society. This line not only encourages black people to be proud of themselves, it also challenges the mentality of black people to be not frightened but to embrace their selves as black.

*“Some people say we got a lot of malice,”* (line 5)

Focusing on the phrase ‘some people say’, indicating that black people had been experiencing cursing from society, saying that they are hostile. This refers to urban riots that caused by black people, regarding to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Rioting and chaos occurred in the cities of United States, because of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. that turned into sadness anger and frustration. After his death, a lot of bitter black people marched on the streets, creating chaos, looting shops, starting fire everywhere. This leads to some people in particular white Americans, thinking of Black Americans that they are malicious.

Not only that, this line also portrays that black people were given generalizations and stereotypes of their own race, also portrays how black people had had racial verbal mistreatment. Malice is behavior that is intended to harm people, desire to cause pain, injury, or distress to another. Stereotypes and generalizations had started in American society from the beginning of colonialism era, especially after slavery of Africans in America. Ideas and images of black people have been used to control the society. By saying that black people have malice, it is expected that black people must be shunned by others particularly white people.

*“...some say it's a lotta nerve”* (line 5)

This implies how others reviling black people for doing things that people say black people had no right to do. In this case, black people struggle for equality in society, but the society which is ruled over by white people says that the black people had no right to be equal. This whole perception against black people lead to racial inequality in the society, and this is what this song concerns about.

*“But I say we won't quit movin' until we get what we deserve”* (line 6)

It can be seen from this line that there is an intention of determination for a change. Civil Rights Act in 1964 and Voting Right have become breakthroughs for black people in the matter of their rights as citizens of United States. However, these occurrences would not change the fact that black people were constantly having unequal opportunities and did not have the same access like economic opportunity in comparison of white people in society. Therefore, through this song, black Americans are expected not only to be satisfied of those remarkable events, but also they also still need to strive for greater equality and keep moving forward to a greater justice. This also reminds black people that they deserve equality in society despite of the color of their skin. They deserve to be equally treated just like others.

*“We've been buked and we've been scorned  
We've been treated bad, talked about as sure as you're born”* (line 6-7)

This portrays how black people were treated among society. It addresses the mistreatment towards black people in society, how they were let down by others. Negative perceptions and stereotypes always cling to the identity of black people no matter what they do. This furthermore portrays how racial disparities exist among black Americans. Black people had been treated badly ever since they were born. Starting from how black women experience intolerably poorer maternal quality healthcare than white women, resulting in high rates of death related to pregnancy and childbirth. Both societal and health system factors affect maternal mortality for black women, who experienced racial barriers of having the

healthcare required. These disparities are caused by structural racism that occurs in institutions like healthcare and social service institutions. This issue puts African-American women into high risk of medical conditions that threaten not only women but also the babies. Racism that is institutionalized brings disadvantages towards black women, especially for black generations. The government that roots in racism as in result fails to provide healthcare regarding to the lives of black generations.

*“Brother we can't quit until we get our share” (line 10)*

This is a call for all African-Americans to gain control of their existences within United States as well as abroad, to comprehend that there is something beautiful and unique about black people. Black people have been suppressed and oppressed for decades. ‘We can’t quit’ here implies persistence of black people to get what they deserve. African-Americans have been struggling with their identity as black people in society where white supremacy dominates. It can be seen here that black people have reached consciousness that they also matter as human beings regardless of their race and skin color; they deserve a share of equal opportunities in all levels in society.

*“I've worked on jobs with my feet and my hand” (line 14)*

This line portrays that the hard work of black people is undervalued because of the systemic racism across the country. It portrays how economic inequality exists between black and white people. The racial wealth gap and racial income gap exist in the society of U.S., in example how white families have larger income and wealth compared to black families. Less wealth translates into fewer opportunities of having economic stability that maintains lives of black families. African-Americans face systematic challenges through the time. The disparities exist between black and white people because of the policies and regulations that were made to blacks’ disadvantages, implicitly and explicitly. From slavery to Jim Crow laws, segregations, redlining, these policies have constantly become barriers for African-Americans to have access of opportunities to the American dream, or at least the equality that they deserve.

*“But all the work I did was for the other man” (line15)*

This highlights racial inequality and disparities that black people experience in society on how they had no chance to gain the same opportunity economically as white people had. Historical background and ongoing displacement, exclusion, and segregation continue to prevent black people gaining economic equality. First, this could refer back to how United States was built by the enslavement of Africans. The slaves built this country for the whites. The bodies of slaves of Africans served as America’s largest financial asset, and they were

forced to work to maintain America's exported commodity such as cottons. America's first business revolved around enslavement of black people. Slavery was the fuel of the growing of America to be world's most powerful economic system.

### **Criminal Justice System in *Blue Lights* Song**

The *Blue lights* questions the scarring trauma of the people to the police officers when there should be nothing to be guilty of; people tend to fear police officers when they are present around civilians. As a black woman, Jorja Smith describes about how black people fear the presence of police officers, to a larger extent, racial biases and prejudices against African-Americans continuously exists within the present U.S. society.

*"Blue Lights"* – Jorja Smith

I wanna turn those blue lights into strobe lights  
Not blue flashing lights, maybe fairy lights  
Those blue lights into strobe lights  
Maybe even fairy lights, not blue flashing lights

Don't you run when you hear the sirens coming (line 5)  
When you hear the sirens coming  
You better not run 'cause the sirens not coming for you  
What have you done?

You went to school that day  
Was a bit late but it was a Monday (line 10)  
Kept after class for answering back  
You apologized, ain't no harm in that

I wanna turn those blue lights  
What have you done  
Into strobe lights (line 15)

There's no need to run  
Not blue flashing lights  
If you've done nothing wrong  
Maybe fairy lights  
Blue lights should just pass you by (line 20)

Gun crime into your right ear  
Drugs and violence into your left  
Default white headphones flooding the auditory  
Subconscious waves you accept  
You're sitting on the 4 back home (line 25)  
"Where you at, G? Answer your phone!"  
Pause the poison to answer his message

Your boy sounds rushed, fears for his adolescence

I wanna turn those blue lights  
What have you done (line 30)  
Into strobe lights  
There's no need to run  
Not blue flashing lights  
If you've done nothing wrong  
Maybe fairy lights (line 35)  
Blue lights should just pass you by

Tall black shadow as you're getting off the bus  
Shadow shows no emotion so what's even the fuss?  
But the face of your boy casts a darker picture  
Of the red handed act, he's gonna whisper; (line 40)  
"Look blud I'm sorry 'cause I know you got my back  
He was running, I couldn't think, I had to get out of that"  
Not long ago you were miming to the "Shook Ones"  
Now this really is part two 'cause you're the shook one  
Hands you the tool as you question your friendship (line 45)  
How's man like you gonna make me a convict?  
Level of a felon when I've done nothing wrong  
Blood on my hands but I don't know where it's from, oh  
You got blood on your hands but you don't know where it's from

You better run when you hear the sirens coming (line 50)  
When you hear the sirens coming  
Better run when you hear the sirens coming  
'Cause they will be coming for you  
Run when you hear the sirens coming  
Better run when you hear the sirens coming  
When you hear the sirens coming  
The blue lights are coming for you

I wanna turn those blue lights  
What have you done  
Into strobe lights  
There's no need to run  
Not blue flashing lights  
If you've done nothing wrong  
Maybe fairy lights  
Blue lights should just pass you by

"Blud, when you hear the sirens coming"

Don't you run when you hear the sirens coming  
"Blud, when you hear the sirens coming"  
Don't you run when you hear the sirens coming  
What have you d-d-d-done done  
Don't you run  
Don't you run  
Don't you run when you hear the sirens coming

Using visual imagery of comparing lights and colors, this implies that strobe lights are better than blue lights. Blue lights here refer to light bulbs that are used on law enforcement vehicles like police officers' cars or motorcycles that function to reach an incident scene quickly, to transport, and to patrol an area, meanwhile strobe lights here refer to electronic lighting devices that are used in clubs or entertainment venues. These two comparisons represent different ideas and meaning. Blue lights represent fear and discomfort, how the fear of police officers appears whenever they are present, knowing the fact that everyone is under their surveillance, which affects psychology and leads to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and fatigue. Meanwhile strobe lights also represent enjoyment and excitement, and pleasure.

These lines imply how black people are scared of the presence of police or law enforcers, using the visual imagery of blue lights. By only seeing the police, black people are triggered to feel trauma in their selves that triggers guilty conscience. Guilty conscience is a feeling when someone feels like they have done something bad or wrong. But the problem here is black people do not do something wrong to deserve feeling of guilty conscience when ever they see the presence of police officers. Guilty conscience here could also be interpreted as a trauma that scarred black people psychologically and mentally because of unequal treatments towards their race in the society.

*Don't you run when you hear the sirens coming (line 5)*

This line means that one shouldn't run when one hears the sirens (of police) coming. When someone is running from the police, it can be assumed that they are guilty or feeling guilty about things that they have done or committed. Police will come only to those who have violated the law. The guilt that is depicted here shows how people in this case black people are afraid of the police, even they do nothing wrong. When police shows up, especially on the road, the feeling of guilt comes to most of people even though they know there's nothing wrong. People feel nervous around police officers although they are innocent. This questions the guilty conscience of the people to the police when there should be nothing

to be guilty of, and how traumatic is it for black people regarding to their experiences with police officers.

To most people, police officers are an unknown power. Their appearances are intimidating; the uniform, the leather, the gun, the car, and etc. Some people are told and frightened by their parents on their childhood saying that if they don't behave the police officers will take them away. It should be admitted that police officers are intimidating. They assert authority. Studies have shown that people who are asked to do things by someone in a uniform usually follow the uniformed person's instructions (Milgram, 1963). Their job is to be suspicious and to look for wrongdoing in innocent-seeming situations. No matter the situation, law enforcement officers have the ability to take away one's freedom, even if just temporarily, and even over a misunderstanding.

Police officers are looking for someone to say the wrong thing to incriminate their selves. Indeed their job is to protect and serve and is undeniably difficult, but they are also in the business of charging or teaching a lesson about a law one may have broken. That should be sufficient to make someone nervous and guilty during such circumstances.

*When you hear the sirens coming  
You better not run 'cause the sirens not coming for you (line 6 – 7)*

These lines portray how people should not be afraid of the sirens of police because these sirens are not meant for them. The only reason of why people run from the sirens is because the intimidating presence of police officers. Tracking from this point of view, it can be seen that the reason of intimidation of law enforcers on how the conflict of police officers and especially black people occur in society, even from the past to the future.

The oppression of black people can be traced back from the beginning of slavery era of United States. Cruel discriminatory treatments have been used to control black people, maintaining the power of white supremacy within society. This continuously grows and evolves to the level of racial inequality and disparities in present society. This inequality brings fear and increased social distance between black people and the police officers. It triggers how black people perceive about police officers. The guilty conscience results as the product of the constant fear of the police.

*“What have you done?  
You went to school that day  
Was a bit late but it was a Monday  
Kept after class for answering back  
You apologized, ain't no harm in that” (line 8 – 12)*

These lines explain how a black person actually acts normal just like others, like going to school, doing normal activities, in here the subject is pictured as a young man/woman who goes to school. This implies deeper meaning that how the some of the victims of police violence are youths or younger generations who still have potentials to do more good in the future yet because of police-sanctioned brutality took the lives of these youngsters. The problem of police killings of unarmed black victims should not be viewed merely as a problem of flawed action on the part of individual police officers, but more as a consequence of the broader problem of racism. Unjustified homicide by police should be added to the long list of consequences of racism. Thus, there is clear evidence of racial differences in fatal police shootings in terms of population proportions. These disparities in police use of force reflect more widespread racial inequities across the entire American criminal justice system.

*“Gun crime into your right and  
Drugs and violence into your left” (line 16 – 17)*

This describes about how black neighborhood is somehow involved in such dangerous and criminal activities like gun crime, drugs abuse, and domestic violence. Black people are much more likely to be arrested for drugs, even though they are not more likely to use or sell them. And black inmates make up a disproportionate amount of the prison population. Some of these disparities could be explained by factors — such as poverty, unemployment, segregation— that lead to more crime and violence in black communities. As a result, police tend to be more present in black neighborhoods — and therefore may be more likely to take policing actions, that ultimately leads to police sanctioned violence towards black Americans.

*“Gun crime into your right and  
Drugs and violence into your left  
Default white headphones flooding the auditory  
Subconscious waves you accept” (line 21 – 24)*

These lines could also portray how lives of black people revolve around criminal stereotypes. Racial bias and profiling of black people lead to the development of dangerous and criminal stereotypes. The figure of the African-American man as criminal has appeared frequently in American popular culture and spread by mass media and has been associated with consequences in the justice system such as racial profiling and harsher sentences for African American defendants in trials.

*“How's man like you gonna make me a convict?  
Level of a felon when I've done nothing wrong”*

This passage questions about the morality of police officers who accused a black person as a criminal without any considerations of the well being of the person. This portrays a lot about how racism has infiltrated and rooted deeply into institutions such as law enforcements. It can be seen here that institutionalized racism takes an important role into criminal justice system. Police officers have failed to provide equal treatment for every civilian regardless of their races. Racist stereotyping influenced decision making of police officers, conveying their mind and rational decisions to negative ways thereby disadvantage African-Americans. When the idea of racism is built into the institution of the criminal justice system, racist and racial discriminatory practices no longer bare on individuals, rather as collective actions of the population. Constant negative stereotypes and practices against black Americans become the fuel for institutional racism to exist, causing deadly force against black people in American society, increased violence, and innocent deaths of black people.

*“Blood on my hands but I don't know where it's from, oh  
You got blood on your hands but you don't know where it's from”*

The vision of blood that appears in the phrase ‘blood on your hands means’ someone is responsible or guilty for another’s death. Yet, it shows how the blood comes from nowhere. This can be interpreted as how the black people are accused for—or at least—guilty for something that they are not responsible for. This mentions that black people have been imprinted by subconscious perceptions of fear and guilty consciences that are caused by the violence of police officers.

## **CONCLUSION**

The protest songs expressed the reality of black life who live in institutionalized racism, starting form lynching up to the present criminal justice system. These songs are not only protest against racism that infiltrates government and institutions and affects policies and regulations which put black into disadvantages but also raising their effort to resist . As seen above, racial biases and prejudices affect ways of how black people are treated. Institutionalized racism changes the mentality of law enforcement into thinking that black people worth less than others. The songs’ lyrics and messages are the reflection of the eras they are perceived. The society in which becomes the reflection of these songs is the society of era from 1920’s, 1960’s, and 2010’s.

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