

Cop voice: Jay-Z, Public Enemy songs highlight police tactic to frighten people of color

January 16 2019



Jennifer Lynn Stoever is an associate professor of English at Binghamton University, State University of New York. Credit: Binghamton University, State University of New York

What do songs by artists like Jay-Z and Public Enemy have in common? They feature representations of 'cop voice,' a racialized way of speaking

that police use to weaponize their voices around people of color, according to faculty at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

Jennifer Lynn Stoever, associate professor of English at Binghamton University, studies what she refers to as the "sonic [color](#) line," 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," said Stoever, "the ideology of the sonic color line operates as an aural boundary: sounds are racialized, naturalized and then policed as 'black' or 'white'."

According to Stoever, police use a racialized and gendered way of speaking known as 'cop' voice' to provoke fear and extreme forms of compliance from people of color. In her new paper, Stoever identifies the phenomenon of the 'cop voice' and analyses how three hip-hop artists have deployed it as a trope in their songs to interrogate [police violence](#) in black communities.

"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 color line to terrorize people of color," wrote Stoever. "Intentionally wielded, although allegedly 'inaudible' to its users, cop voice almost immediately escalates routine police interactions with people of color..."

Stoever argues that hip-hop artists like Jay-Z, Public Enemy and KRS-One represent 'cop voice' through shifts in their rapping flow or by using white guest rappers.

"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," wrote Stoever. "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."

Jay-Z's "99 Problems," features an interaction between a white police officer and the black man he has pulled over. According to Stoever, Jay-Z changes his cadence in the song to take on the sound of state-sanctioned white supremacy that he hears in the cop's voice.

"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," wrote Stoever. "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 color line, calling attention to it and enacting its relations of power by inhabiting whiteness with audible masculine swagger and expectation of immediate obedience."

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, wrote Stoever.

"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 semiprivate encounters to exert unearned racial

authority via the sonic color line," she wrote.

More information: Jennifer Lynn Stoever, 'Doing fifty-five in a fifty-four': Hip hop, cop voice and the cadence of white supremacy in the United States, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* (2018). [DOI: 10.1386/jivs.3.2.115_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jivs.3.2.115_1)

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: Cop voice: Jay-Z, Public Enemy songs highlight police tactic to frighten people of color (2019, January 16) retrieved 18 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-01-cop-voice-jay-z-enemy-songs.html>

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