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*And now the telling of...*

## The Rhetoric of N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police"

Annelise Green

*Assigned in COM 301 (Rhetoric and Social Influence): Professor Joel Lemuel*

While rhetoric completely saturates the average life in speeches, advertisements, and media, no other rhetoric leaves as much of an impact as music. In a song, the message can be delivered in a unique, engaging way that leaves the audience listening to it over and over again (or getting it stuck in their heads). Beyond intriguing the audience to process the song in an arguably more engaging way than any other kind of rhetoric, music provides opportunities to explore rhetorical strategies on a deeper level.

One song that has been particularly successful in crossing over generations is "Fuck Tha Police," (FTP) by the gangsta rap group N.W.A, which is the artifact to be analyzed in this paper. First, the artifact will be introduced and relevant context will be discussed. The methods utilized to analyze the song's rhetoric (dramatism, framing, and perspective by incongruity) will be explained before analysis of the song. All of these components will aid in the analysis of the effectiveness of FTP's rhetoric and whether or not N.W.A. achieves their goals. When writing FTP, N.W.A. had the intentions of raising awareness of systematic injustice with cops and the justice systems, informing people of the predetermined life created by racism toward the African-American community within Compton, and finally to reorient feelings towards cops/judges/black urban youth. FTP accomplishes its goals by symbolically putting the police on trial, detailing a tragic narrative that is hard not to be sympathetic towards, and ultimately

creating victory over injustice.

### The Artifact

"Fuck Tha Police" (FTP) is a song by Niggaz Wit Attitudes, or the N.W.A. It was released on the album *Straight Outta Compton* in 1988. The N.W.A consisted of Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, DJ Yella, Ice Cube, and MC Ren. They stayed together from 1986 to 1991. The album *Straight Outta Compton* sold 750,000 copies before N.W.A went on tour (Simon, Schuster, & Serpick). *Straight Outta Compton* was a double-platinum album that popularized the gangsta rap genre (Simon, Schuster, & Serpick). MC Ren and Ice Cube wrote the actual lyrics of the song "Fuck Tha Police", while the entire N.W.A performed it.

The lyrics of FTP follow the narrative of a courtroom scene. Members of N.W.A. act as the prosecuting attorneys in a trial against a police officer. The stanzas detail testimonies from each rapper describing incidents where a police officer has wronged them in some way. In the concluding scene, the police officer is found guilty and convicted.

### Context

Each member of the N.W.A grew up in a neighborhood plagued with dangerous crime. MC Ren grew up in Compton, where he was a gang member and drug dealer before turning to music (Connelly, 2016). Ice Cube was born in South Central Los Angeles, which was shaped by drugs, guns, and violence. Due to his high performance in school, Cube's parents sent him

to a suburban high school (Ice Cube, 2016). The surrounding affluence of his high school made Cube question why the violence of his neighborhood wasn't getting the national attention, and help, it deserved. Cube saw many of his friends either murdered or sent to jail before graduation (Ice Cube, 2016). Each member of the group grew up in a community afflicted by these problems that were especially affecting the African-American population (Tse, 2015). These situational factors were the inspiration and ultimate background for the politically driven lyrics of "Fuck Tha Police."

Compton didn't become an epicenter of street violence overnight. The rise of the original gangs, the Crips and Bloods, began in the 1970s (Tse, 2015). When these gangs started getting heavily involved in the drug trade, LAPD Chief Daryl Gates used an almost military approach to handling crime (Tse, 2015). By the time it was 1988, the situation had only worsened. In fact, in 1990, Compton had a murder rate of almost 91 homicides per 100,000 residents (Tse, 2015). Adding racial profiling to an impoverished community put a lot of undeserving residents in the line of fire.

The members of N.W.A used music to express their unfortunate reality. They were able to protest non violently with song. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Ice Cube recalls that "Our music was our only weapon," in response to the LAPD (Grow, 2015). The inflammatory lyrics were designed to be disruptive in order to really highlight the injustice of police brutality. The medium of music allowed frustrations to be expressed in a way that was shareable to a mass audience. Due to its inflammation, message, and medium, the album snowballed into a Phenomenon.

Audiences of "Fuck Tha Police," ranged from African-Americans within the

impoverished communities of Compton to the more privileged communities of the larger United States. As Ice Cube once stated, "We wanted to highlight the excessive force and...the humiliation that we go through in these situations. So the audience can know why we wrote 'Fuck Tha Police,' and they can feel the same way," (Carter, 2015). Clearly from this statement, N.W.A. intended to reach an array of audiences in order to expose the truth of the injustices happening in Compton at the time. Therefore, the rhetors wanted as many people (particularly the justice departments) to hear their voices and note that they were being victimized.

### **The Methods**

Before in-depth analysis, the methodologies used to process the rhetoric of FTP will be introduced. Namely, dramatism and perspective by incongruity were used to analyze FTP.

Dramatism is a methodology developed by Kenneth Burke that relies on the principle that life is a drama and that these principles can be applied to all forms of communication. By comparing life to a drama, it is easier to understand why people do the things they do by providing a direct route to human motives and human relations (Mangham & Overington, 2005). In this way, rhetoric can be broken down into different aspects of the dramatic pentad: agent, act, scene, purpose, and agency (Burke, 1978). These describe the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the rhetoric, respectively. Also within a drama are the frameworks, or how the story is presented to an audience. A drama can either be tragic or comic (Burke, 2014). In the tragic frame, there is are clear victims and perpetrators with an obvious understanding of an unavoidable, undesirable fate (Burke, 2014). In a comedy, nothing is set in stone and there is a

serendipitous unknown for the resolution of the story (Burke, 2014). Dramatism was chosen to analyze FTP because dramatism depicts how rhetoric is used to construct social realities, such as the dramatic courtroom scene.

Frame analysis can be determined through pentadic analysis. Burke argued throughout his writings that every story has each element of the pentad, but that different components of the pentad can be emphasized to help communicate a message (Burke, 1978). For instance, if a narrative emphasizes the agents/agency, that could communicate a level of control that the protagonists have over the situation. With the power to manipulate what is going on, stories that highlight agent or agency are comic. If the story emphasizes the purpose or scene, the protagonists don't necessarily have control over what happens. This provides a significance to that character paralyzation that produces a tragic frame.

Burke was also instrumental in introducing the concept of perspective by incongruity. This idea was presented in response to certain logical appeals making an audience feel threatened, or that their understanding of the world is challenged. Perspective by incongruity is an alternative to logical appeals that fail in being persuasive due to the audience's worldviews being naturally resistant to pure logic. Perspective by incongruity suggests new ways to view the world as opposed to being limited by a rigid framework of perception (Burke, 1984). This is accomplished by comparing two unlike things in a new way, shifting the audience's previous worldviews. Perspective by incongruity is inherent to the effectiveness of rhetoric in FTP.

### **Analysis**

An essential component of FTP is the frame transformation necessary to communicate the message. Primarily in the

media, African-Americans (especially in low income neighborhoods) are framed as violent criminals. Because of how prominent African-Americans are communicated, or framed, the social frameworks created become a central element in cultural and individual expectations of African-Americans (Goffman, 1974). If the audience believed the rhetors to be dangerous criminals, it would be difficult to persuade them. The rhetors had to transform the stereotype from criminals into victims of racial profiling and police brutality that the audience could sympathize with. In addition to the frame transformation of African-Americans, the police had to be reframed as well. The general frame for policemen is that they are spotlessly moral. Even if there was violence caused by policemen in the media, it is framed as a policeman protecting himself. The expected frames of policemen do not include the option of policemen being immoral. N.W.A directly transforms that perception into one of violent criminals, painting the convicted policeman as a "redneck, white-bread, chicken-shit motherfucker." The most potent persuasive strategy used to reframe the stereotypical African-American in Compton is perspective by incongruity.

Perspective by incongruity challenges the listener's current understandings of the safety and justice that police and courts are supposed to provide in FTP. Society typically views and expects policemen to be lawful and good. In FTP, there is a staging of N.W.A versus the police department in a courtroom. This immediately defies the general public's reality that police are moral, law-abiding citizens because the song walks the audience through all of the police's immoral transgressions. For example, Ice Cube raps that police "have the authority to kill a minority," causing the audience to reevaluate whether or not police are dangerous and given too much unchecked

power over minority lives. The lyrics provide evidence of violence by detailing cops using a mace or slamming African-Americans down onto asphalt. FTP emphasizes brutal physical treatment of African-Americans, even saying that the reading of Miranda rights is “junk.” These lyrics allude to the reality that despite the protective measures put in place for people being arrested, the police of Compton disregard these and violate minority rights. N.W.A continues in slandering policemen reputation. The lyrics explain that an African-American teenager showing some level of wealth would immediately be suspected of being a drug dealer by the Compton police. The explanation of police assumption of illegally obtained funds again realigns audience perspective. To the larger population, having wealth would be a sign of success. However, the lyrics accuse police of preferring incarceration to seeing African-Americans climb the social ladder with monetary success in the lines: “You would rather see me in the pen/Than me & Lorenzo rollin in a Benz-o.” At this point, general perception of police has been completely reversed in perspective by incongruity. A further critique of the justice system is seen when MC Ren raps about feeling the need to have a weapon to protect himself as a “stand-by for the so-called law,” suggesting that not only do the police not offer protection, but neither does the law. This reality for the people of Compton epitomizes perspective by incongruity because the listeners of the song are forced to understand the police and justice system as different from their initial worldviews.

The dramatic pentad provides a framework that establishes the courtroom scene in FTP, ultimately giving the message to the audience that underprivileged African-Americans in Compton deserve justice. FTP uses the pentad in the form of a courtroom

scene, where MC Ren, Ice Cube, and Eazy E are prosecuting attorneys against the police department. This is another instance of perspective by incongruity, where the typical expectation of self-described drug dealers and gangsters are seeking legal repercussions instead of violence. Each artist gives testimony about specific transgressions that the police have done and the scene ends in a conviction. The testimonies are in response to scenes that feature each component of the pentad. In the courtroom, the prosecution (or the agents) is emphasized. In a literal sense, the prosecutors have control of the floor in front of the judge. However, because the agents are highlighted, the frame becomes comic because the agents have control over what is said and have influence over the verdict.

Framing also helps accomplish sympathy from the audience. One testimony describes MC Ren being pulled over in his car by a cop, who uses his authority to arrest MC Ren. While the agent, act, agency, and scene are accounted for, the purpose is what creates an abnormality in this scene. When MC Ren asks why the cop pulled him over, the response is merely “Cause I feel like it,” instead of an actual illegality. Now, the pentad creates a scene of injustice that leaves the audience uncomfortable with the events. The dramatic pentad created a version of a typical exercise of a police officer’s authority and inserted an example of a breach of power. Because the purpose is emphasized in this example, MC Ren being pulled over is painted as tragic and elicits sympathy from the audience for the injustice of the situation. The use of the courtroom scenes’ testimonies creates a real call for justice that N.W.A believes should happen within the structure of the courts.

Examining the testimonies in the courtroom, smaller stories within the dramatic pentad are also presented to emphasize the call

for justice. Ice Cube describes himself as on a warpath or engaging in a bloodbath, which paints himself as a soldier in a war. MC Ren continues this narrative by describing himself as a sniper. The dramatic and dangerous urgency of war is more understandable to the general public, which they can then apply to the specific dangers of Compton. MC Ren further describes the police as villains with evil potential in the lines "The motherfuckin villain that is mad/With the potential to get bad as fuck." Creating a scene where there is a clear good side (soldiers defending themselves) versus a clear bad side (the police as villains) is an extremely effective way to persuade an audience to the purpose. This narrative also portrays the rhetors as actively defending themselves from their perceived threat of the police. Instead of treating the police with the respect that most of the general public does, the rhetors are directly threatening them in another instance of perspective by incongruity. This flip of expectations of how to treat police only further emphasize the level of danger that the people of Compton must be in if they feel the need to threaten police. The classic story of good versus evil is not only dramatic and memorable, it is also a narrative that is easily grasped by the general public. Because everyone agrees that good should win, the listeners by the end of the song are laughing at the convicted policeman because they believe he is evil and deserves it. Ultimately, the audience feels satisfaction that while in the tragic scenes N.W.A. didn't have control over the situation, N.W.A. as prosecution have become victorious over injustices. In a subtle way, the lyrics of FTP organize the listeners into the artists' ultimate

purpose: to believe that the brutalized African-Americans should receive justice.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the artists in N.W.A are successful rhetors in FTP. N.W.A was able to accomplish frame transformation through perspective by incongruity in addition to communicating their purpose with the dramatic pentad. The popular use of song allows for their message to be spread and heard easily by large masses of people as well. N.W.A rose awareness of systematic injustice with cops and the justice systems, informed people of the predetermined life created by racism toward the African-American community within Compton, and reoriented feelings towards cops/judges/black urban youth in FTP. While the cry for justice was potent in 1988, FTP remains meaningful today in a world still ridden with racial profiling and police brutality. Only truly artfully created rhetoric can successfully communicate decades after its establishment. In conclusion, fuck tha police.

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