

## Study of the Rap song 'I Can't Breathe' by Illawarra Rapper DOBBY (Rhyan Clapham)

**Context and Rationale:** Artist Rhyan Clapham proudly identifies as a Filipino and Aboriginal musician, whose Indigenous family is Murrawarri, from the town of Brewarrina, on Ngemba land. His latest song, 'I Can't Breathe' explores the Black Lives Matter Movement through an Indigenous Australian lens. The song and accompanying resources (The Guardian article and BBC interview) allow students to explore problematic knowledge<sup>1</sup> and engage deeply in a text that links to Australian history as well as contemporary socio-political events. The subject matter allows students to connect rich texts to relevant contemporary world issues. Students respond to, interpret, and analyse the language and structure of the text, and recognise that rap is a unique means of expressing ideas, using language appropriate to audience, purpose, and context. Through this study students understand the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds. Students also question and challenge cultural assumptions and examine how song lyrics provide a voice to minority groups to challenge these assumptions. These resources are best suited to Stage 5 due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

**Note:** The subject matter may be upsetting to some students. Students should be warned prior to commencing the study that they should notify the class teacher if they feel distressed.

### **Outcomes:**

EN5-1A - A student: › responds to and composes increasingly sophisticated and sustained texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis, imaginative expression and pleasure.

EN5-7D - A student: › understands and evaluates the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds.

EN5-8D - A student: › questions, challenges and evaluates cultural assumptions in texts and their effects on meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education and Training, Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate, (2003) Quality teaching in NSW public schools: discussion paper, Sydney NSW.

## Student Worksheet

Read the biography on Dobby and then complete the following activities.



### About

**DOBBY** is a rapper, drummer, speaker and workshop facilitator. Aged 25, he proudly identifies as a Filipino and Aboriginal musician, whose family is from Brewarrina on Ngemba land, and is a member of the Murrawarri Republic in Weilmoringle, NSW. Rhyen is also a skilled music composer and holds a BA in Music, he was the 2017 recipient for the bi-annual Peter Sculthorpe Fellowship.

**DOBBY** released his self-titled 'DOBBY' EP in September 2018, which he wrote and produced.

The DOBBY E.P tour kicked off with a loud bang, making rapid waves in the Australian music scene. With incredible shows at BIGSOUND, Sydney Opera House and Surry Hills Festival, OzAsia Festival in Adelaide, Australian Music Week and No Place Like Home.

**DOBBY** is a multi-instrumentalist; his *live shows* consist of him jumping between the drums and mic, while also incorporating piano and live drum pads, and his is accompanied by incredible turntablist DIOLA. The DOBBY EP Tour has continued into the new year, additional tour dates are listed below.

**DOBBY's** musical training began at age 7. He studied classical piano and achieved AMEB grade 6 and grade 2 musicianship. At age 14, he learned jazz drumkit, and in 2012 performed as part of the Wollongong Conservatorium of Music in California and Nevada, USA. **DOBBY** has completed a Bachelor of Music at the University of NSW, and an Indigenous Studies Honours (focusing on Aboriginal Hip Hop music) in 2015.

He has performed as a rapper and drummer for a variety of events such as BIGSOUND 2017/18, The Plot Festival, Yabun Festival, UNSW corporate and academic functions, Koori Radio events and at numerous NAIDOC celebrations across Australia. He recently spoke on a panel as part of VIVID Sydney's VIVID Ideas Exchange. In 2019 DOBBY set sail on his European tour to perform at the Great Escape festival (UK), New Skool Rules (NL) and Reeperbahn Festival (GER).

His most recent achievement was being awarded the First Nations Emerging Career Development Award. He received this in 2020 at the First Nations Arts Awards.

<https://onpagelink.com/dobby/>

## Contextualising the Song

Read The Guardian article from the 01/06/2020 'Family of David Dungay, who died in custody, express solidarity with family of George Floyd.'

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/01/family-of-david-dungay-who-died-in-custody-express-solidarity-with-family-of-george-floyd>

Engage in a class discussion covering the following points:

- Who was George Floyd?
- Who was David Dungay?
- What similarities do you see between the two cases?
- The murder of George Floyd has sparked protest all around the world. Why do you think this movement, 'Black Lives Matter' has become a global movement?
- Protests are one way for people to be heard, to express their pain, outrage, and desire for change. Music can be a source of entertainment, but also a significant way to express opinion and demand change. Complete the mind map below. The first answer has been done for you.

Music has the power to...

Entertain



Lyrics

## I CAN'T BREATHE

### VERSE 1

sick of having to explain myself  
they wanna know the history the pain might help,  
they making me wild, need to restrain myself  
If I were you, I would educate myself

They want me to hate myself,  
degrade, dismiss and erase myself,  
They said Australia and America's not the same,  
I say David Dungay, they don't even know the name

That's b\*\*\*\*\*! write to your member tell 'em what's happening  
You gotta challenge the white settler narrative  
Got a lotta books that call us nomadic savages  
Maybe that's a connection to them attacking' us

Government thinking up any other solution  
But truth leads to Treaty and revolution  
Killers acquitted, your silence is killin',  
Give us your platform so your people can listen,

First came the massacres, then came the mission,  
then stole the children, then filled the prison  
No wonder our people do not trust the system;  
Over 400, not one conviction, shame!

### HOOK

No justice, and no peace  
They won't charge the police  
They both said "I can't breathe"  
They both said "I can't breathe"

No justice, and no peace  
They won't charge the police  
They both said "I can't breathe"  
They both said "I can't breathe"

### VERSE 2

He died when you choked him on his back in the pen  
The 5 were some untrained angry men  
So why are you surprised it was actually them?  
And what would happen if there were no cameras then?

If you're white, come and fight with your Blackfella friends  
And write down the number of their badge with a pen,  
The value of a life we shouldn't have to defend  
And saying Sorry means it never happens again

Some of these cops musta been bullied in PE  
to kill mob, that's why Kaepernick took a knee,  
Donald Trump's calling that a lack of respect,  
but what do you call a knee to the back of your neck, huh?

This s\*\*\*'s as bad as it gets,

cause some of these coppers really don't know how to protect,  
and it's legitimised, see they're trynna minimise genocide  
No more twitter fights, 'cause the revolution televised, go!

### **HOOK**

No justice, and no peace  
They won't charge the police  
They both said "I can't breathe"  
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No justice, and no peace  
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### **VERSE 3 (BAARKA)**

You bring violence to my motherland then blame me for it,  
Then expect me to be silent and than thank you for it,  
I ain't thankful, they been killin' my people by the masses,  
And I'm fed up to the neck by you right-wing fascists,

I feel anger when my people feel anger, that's connection,  
We're angry for a reason cause our babies need protecting,  
I'm scared to send them out cause their colour is a weapon  
And when they walk through the streets people somehow feel threatened

Just stop! We only want the system to be civilised,  
You televise your point of view then feed the sheeps full of lies,  
You bought the divide when you set up all the missions  
And you still cause divide killing my people in prisons

I'm sick of it, sick and tired of the thick of it,  
Picture it, walk in our shoes get a sniff of it,  
You feelin it? Nah you choose to show no respect,  
How about so called Australia gets their knees off our necks!

### **OUTRO**

No justice, and no peace  
They won't charge the police  
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## Student Worksheet

Listen to the song 'I can't Breathe' by rapper Dobby on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmCE3pFhs6M> and re-read the lyrics. Then complete the following activities. Please note that these activities are created to examine empathy and may make you feel upset. If this is the case it may be necessary to speak to your class teacher or seek the help of a counsellor.

### Initial Impressions

1. After listening to the song 'I Can't Breathe' the teacher will hand out post-it notes to students. On your post-it note, write one thing the song made you think or feel. This is a personal activity and you do not need to write your name on your post-it note. Post your note on the white board.
2. After everyone has posted a note you will have the opportunity to read all the post-it notes. Place a tick next to any of the words or statements you strongly agree with.
3. The class will discuss any patterns that occur after the post-it exercises.

### Digging into the text

4. Verse one, stanza one of the song suggests the starting point for dealing with racism is education and having an understanding of history. Explain why it is important for people to understand (A) world history and (B) Australian history.
5. Who is referred to in the collective pronoun "*they*" in the statement, "*they want me to hate myself*"?
6. Define the following words: degrade, dismiss, and erase. Why do these words establish a deliberate negative tone in the song?

7. Consider how people should be treated in our world today.

<b>Think</b> about how people should be treated and create a bank of at least 5 positive words.	<b>Pair-</b> turn to the person next to you and share your list. Add your partners new words to your list.	<b>Share</b> ideas with your partner. Use your best words to collaboratively create a positive statement about the way all people should be treated. This statement may be a few sentences in length.

8. Verse one, stanza two and three of the song suggests history is subverted or silenced for a purpose. Using evidence from the song as well as your own understanding, why might the government want to subvert or silence the true history of Australia?

\* Subvert- to subvert means to use words or actions to criticise or undermine. An individual or government subverts in order to destabilise or destroy.

9. Explain the following quote, *“Over 400, not one conviction, shame!”*

10. Research who Colin Kaepernick is, and what does it mean to *“take a knee”*?

11. Find two quotes from verse two to show that technology has changed the public story of police brutality? What is the effect of technology in this context?

12. What in verse two suggests this song is a ‘call to action’ for both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous members of the Australian community?

13. List as many examples of forms of injustice as you can find in verse three.

14. Use the definitions below to explain *“fed up to the neck with...right-wing fascists.”*



**Right-wing** politics holds the view that certain social orders and hierarchies are inevitable, natural, normal, or desirable, typically supporting this position on the basis of natural law, economics, or tradition.

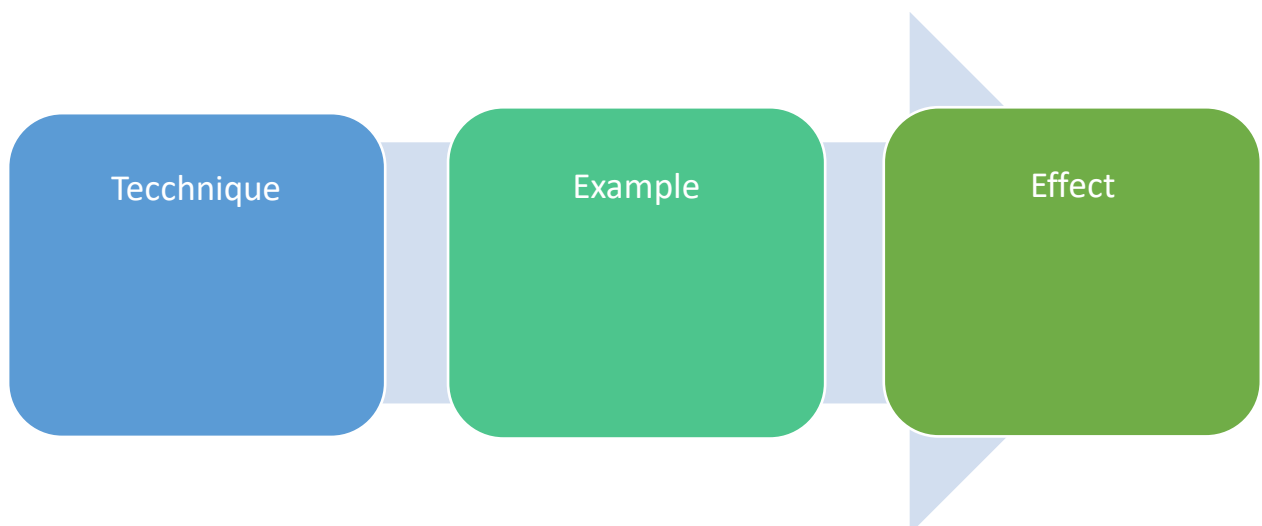
**Fascism** is a form of government that is a type of one-party dictatorship. They work for a totalitarian one-party state, forcibly suppressing opposition and criticism.

### Understanding the Techniques

Your class teacher will split the class into small groups and allocate each group a technique from the list below. It is time for your group to analyze your technique and be the expert.

- **Listing** in verse one stanza five
- **Repetition and rhyme** in the hook and outro
- **Rhetorical question** in verse two
- **Emotive language** throughout the entire song
- The **metaphor** in verse three stanza two
- The **metaphor** in verse three stanza three
- **Capitalization** of 'Sorry' verse two stanza two
- **Idiom** in verse three stanza four
- **Alluding to** historical events
- **Alluding to** current world events
- **Juxtaposition** of listen (verse one stanza four) and silent (verse three stanza one).

Record your technique, example in the form of a quotation and analysis in the squares below. Report back to the class.



### Rapping it up

- Create your own rap stanza, image or Wordle showing what you feel and hope for a world without racism.

## Teacher Copy- Suggested responses

*Please note the responses are suggestions only.*

*The class teacher should modify all activities to suit the context of their own classroom.*

**Read the biography on Dobby and then complete the following activities.**



### **About**

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## Contextualising the Song

Read The Guardian article from the 01/06/2020 'Family of David Dungay, who died in custody, express solidarity with family of George Floyd.'

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Engage in a class discussion covering the following points:

- Who was George Floyd?

*George Floyd (October 14, 1973 – May 25, 2020) was a 46 year old African American man who was killed by police during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020. His confronting death at the hands of police have sparked protests all around the world in a movement referred to as 'Black Lives Matter.'*

- Who was David Dungay?

*David Dungay Jr was a 26-year-old Dunghutti man from Kempsey. He died in Sydney's Long Bay jail on 29 December 2015 after prison guards rushed his cell to prevent him eating biscuits. He was dragged into another cell, held face down and injected with a sedative.*

- What similarities do you see between the two cases?

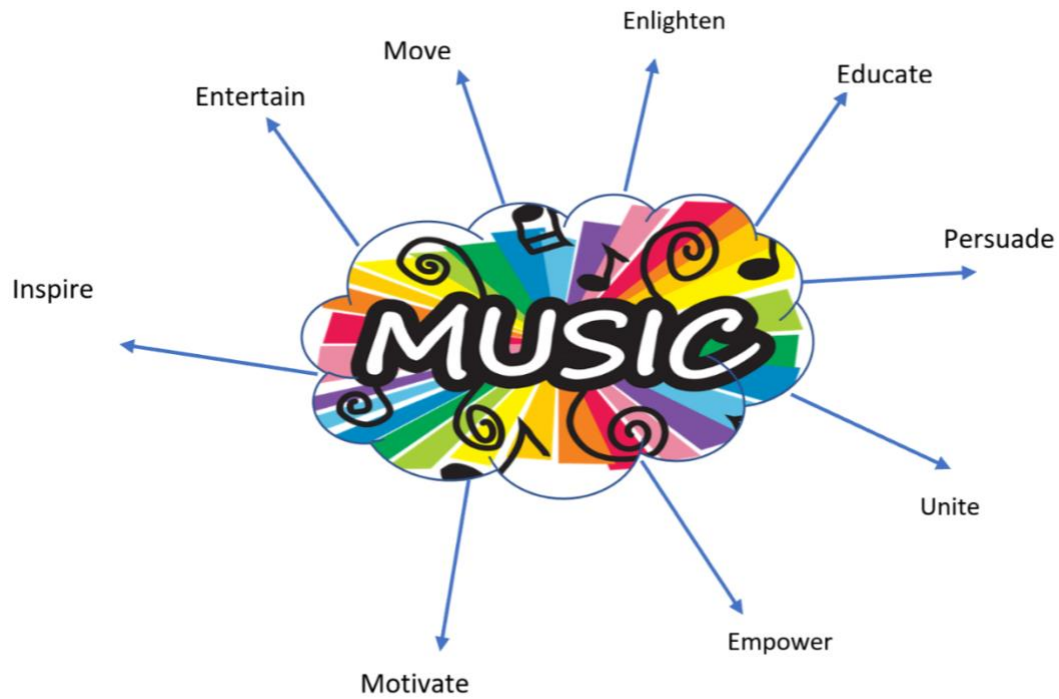
*Both men were tragically killed by white police/ guards. Both died saying they couldn't breathe. Both cases sparked social outrage and show there is an undeniable history of no consequences for race fuelled police brutality. The family and community of both men continue to fight for justice and to see the conviction of the individuals responsible for the death of their loved ones.*

- The murder of George Floyd has sparked protest all around the world. Why do you think this movement, 'Black Lives Matter' has become a global movement?

*Because issues such as racial inequality, racial profiling, police brutality, deaths in custody and the overrepresentation of people of colour in prisons is an issue that affects many countries. Many people can identify with the suffering of the Floyd family. This case can be viewed as a catalyst for change globally. It reveals the often confronting reality that racism and discrimination is often embedded in history, in our institutions and needs to be openly discussed in order to create change.*

- Protests are one way for people to be heard, to express their pain, outrage, and desire for change. Music can be a source of entertainment, but also a significant way to express opinion and demand change. Complete the mind map below. The first answer has been done for you.

Music has the power to...



Lyrics

## **I CAN'T BREATHE**

### **VERSE 1**

sick of having to explain myself  
they wanna know the history the pain might help,  
they making me wild, need to restrain myself  
If I were you, I would educate myself

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degrade, dismiss and erase myself,  
They said Australia and America's not the same,  
I say David Dungay, they don't even know the name

That's b\*\*\*\*\*! write to your member tell 'em what's happening  
You gotta challenge the white settler narrative  
Got a lotta books that call us nomadic savages  
Maybe that's a connection to them attacking' us

Government thinking up any other solution  
But truth leads to Treaty and revolution  
Killers acquitted, your silence is killin',  
Give us your platform so your people can listen,

First came the massacres, then came the mission,  
then stole the children, then filled the prison  
No wonder our people do not trust the system;  
Over 400, not one conviction, shame!

### **HOOK**

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### **VERSE 2**

He died when you choked him on his back in the pen  
The 5 were some untrained angry men  
So why are you surprised it was actually them?  
And what would happen if there were no cameras then?

If you're white, come and fight with your Blackfella friends  
And write down the number of their badge with a pen,  
The value of a life we shouldn't have to defend  
And saying Sorry means it never happens again

Some of these cops musta been bullied in PE  
to kill mob, that's why Kaepernick took a knee,  
Donald Trump's calling that a lack of respect,  
but what do you call a knee to the back of your neck, huh?

This s\*\*\*'s as bad as it gets,

cause some of these coppers really don't know how to protect,  
and it's legitimised, see they're trynna minimise genocide  
No more twitter fights, 'cause the revolution televised, go!

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Then expect me to be silent and than thank you for it,  
I ain't thankful, they been killin' my people by the masses,  
And I'm fed up to the neck by you right-wing fascists,

I feel anger when my people feel anger, that's connection,  
We're angry for a reason cause our babies need protecting,  
I'm scared to send them out cause their colour is a weapon  
And when they walk through the streets people somehow feel threatened

Just stop! We only want the system to be civilised,  
You televise your point of view then feed the sheeps full of lies,  
You bought the divide when you set up all the missions  
And you still cause divide killing my people in prisons

I'm sick of it, sick and tired of the thick of it,  
Picture it, walk in our shoes get a sniff of it,  
You feelin it? Nah you choose to show no respect,  
How about so called Australia gets their knees off our necks!

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmCE3pFhs6M> and re-read the lyrics. Then complete the following activities. Please note that these activities are created to examine empathy and may evoke an emotional response in students. Students should be reminded that they should speak to the class teacher or counsellor if they feel distressed.

#### Initial Impressions

1. After listening to the song 'I Can't Breathe' the teacher will hand out post-it notes to students. On your post-it note, write one thing the song made you think or feel. This is a personal activity and you do not need to write your name on your post-it note. Post your note on the white board.

*Note: This activity assumes a positive and collaborative classroom climate<sup>2</sup>. This task could be modified to allow students to compose a private response in their own exercise books. The teacher could ask students who are comfortable to read aloud their responses.*

2. After everyone has posted a note you will have the opportunity to read all the post-it notes. Place a tick next to any of the words or statements you strongly agree with.
3. The class will discuss any patterns that occur after the post it exercises.

#### Digging into the text

4. Verse one, stanza one of the song suggests the starting point for dealing with racism is education and having an understanding of history. Explain why it is important for people to understand (A) world history and (B) Australian history.

*Understanding Australian history is essential in eliminating racism because government actions and policies were, and in many cases continue to be rooted in racism. It is important to see that this pain is ongoing and compounding for Aboriginal people. This connects to world history in that many Indigenous cultures have experienced invasion, dispossession, massacres and ongoing policy and practices that are discriminatory. Discrimination is both an individual and collective experience.*

5. Who is referred to in the collective pronoun "they" in the statement, "they want me to hate myself"?

*'They' could be a reference to the government, the media or any institution that utilizes stereotypes, that demonizes or seeks to portray Aboriginality as something to be ashamed of.*

6. Define the following words: degrade, dismiss, and erase. Why do these words establish a deliberate negative tone in the song?

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<sup>2</sup> Ayres, P. Dinham, S. & Sawyer, W. (1998) (2000) Successful Senior Secondary Teaching Quality teaching series, #1, Deakin, ACT: Australian College of Education.

*Degrade is to treat someone with disregard or contempt. Dismiss is to ignore or send away. Erase is to obliterate all traces of something. These words grouped together create a compounding negative tone. This tone is essential in conveying the pain of the composer and prompting the audience to have empathy for those who are impacted by racism.*

7. Consider how people should be treated in our world today.

<p><b>Think</b> about how people should be treated and create a bank of at least 5 positive words.</p>	<p><b>Pair-</b> turn to the person next to you and share your list. Add your partners new words to your list.</p>	<p><b>Share</b> ideas with your partner. Use your best words to collaboratively create a positive statement about the way all people should be treated. This statement may be a few sentences in length.</p>
<p><i>With respect As equals As citizens With humanity With compassion</i></p>	<p><i>With recognition of their rights. With acceptance With tolerance As part of a community</i></p>	<p><i>People in our world are part of a community. Everyone has rights and freedoms. All people should be treated with respect, tolerance and compassion.</i></p>

8. Verse one, stanza two and three of the song suggests history is subverted or silenced for a purpose. Using evidence from the song as well as your own understanding, why might the government want to subvert or silence the true history of Australia?

\* Subvert- to subvert means to use words or actions to criticise or undermine. An individual or government subverts in order to destabilise or destroy.

*Governments often do not want to face uncomfortable truths about the past. People may want to promote the stereotype that Australia is 'the lucky country' when in fact it is only lucky for a select few.*

9. Explain the following quote, "Over 400, not one conviction, shame!"

*434 Aboriginal people have died in custody since 1991.*

The following BBC clip may assist students to understand the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the Australian context.

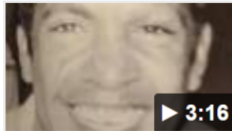


<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-australia-52991582/indigenous-australian-deaths-in-custody-why-i-m-fighting-for-my-uncle>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned this film contains images of deceased persons.

## Indigenous Australian deaths in custody: 'Why I'm fighting for ...

<https://www.bbc.com> › [news](#) › [world-australia-52991582](#) › [indigenous-austr...](#)



As demonstrations sweep the US, children **are** making the point that ...  
Australian man Eddie Murray was 21 ...

5 days ago

10. Research who Colin Kaepernick is, and what does it mean to “take a knee”?

*Colin Rand Kaepernick is an American civil rights activist and football quarterback. Taking a knee during the national anthem is a silent protest to show support for the Black Lives Matter Movement.*

11. Find two quotes from verse two to show that technology has changed the public story of police brutality? What is the effect of technology in this context?

*Technology has changed the public story of police brutality. This is evident in the quotes, “And what would happen if there were no cameras then?” and “cause the revolution televised, go!” These lines suggest technology has made the brutality visible and accessible to the whole world. Televised protests have acted as a catalyst to spark change all around the world.*

12. What in verse two suggests this song is a ‘call to action’ for both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous members of the Australian community?

*The quote “If you’re white, come and fight with your Blackfella friends” shows the composer is calling all members of the community to protest and have their voices heard to create a better society. It shows eliminating racism should be the priority of all citizens.*

13. List as many examples of forms of injustice as you can find in verse three.

*Some of the injustices evident in verse three include: Invasion, racism, violence, creating negative stereotypes and feeding this to the masses to divide the nation, segregation and deaths in custody.*

14. Use the definition below to explain “fed up to the neck with...right-wing fascists.”

**Right-wing** politics holds the view that certain social orders and hierarchies are inevitable, natural, normal, or desirable, typically supporting this position on the basis of natural law, economics, or tradition.

**Fascism** is a form of government that is a type of one-party dictatorship. They work for a totalitarian one-party state.

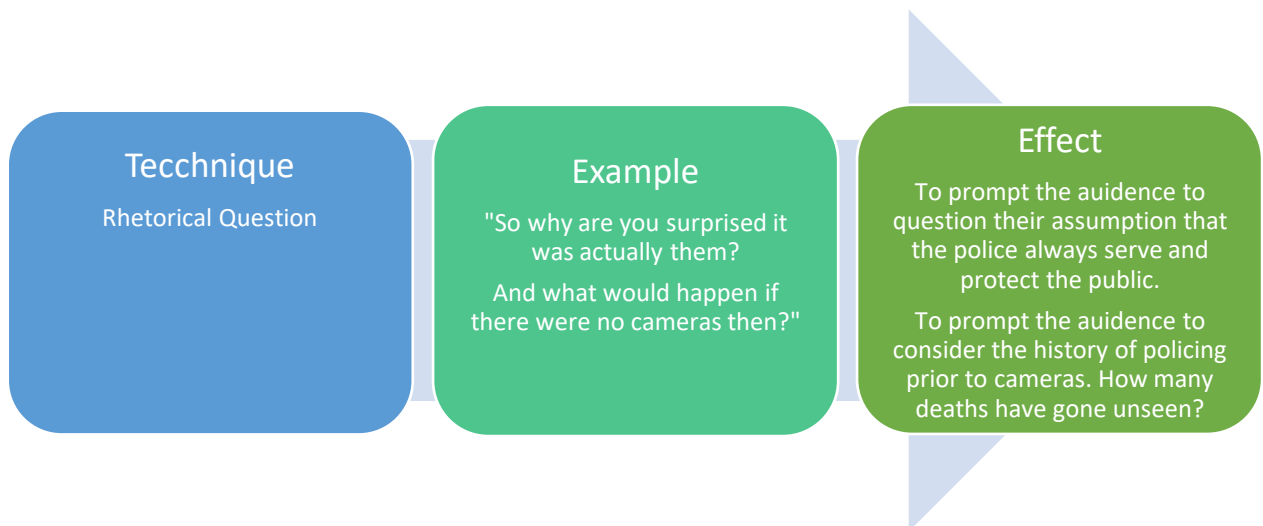
*Sick of a totalitarian government promoting the traditional view that some cultures are inferior and that this should just be accepted.*

### Understanding the Techniques

Your class teacher will split the class into small groups and allocate each group a technique from the list below. It is time for your group to analyze your technique and be the expert.

- **Listing** in verse one stanza five
- **Repetition and rhyme** in the hook and outro
- **Rhetorical question** in verse two
- **Emotive language** throughout the entire song
- The **metaphor** in verse three stanza two
- The **metaphor** in verse three stanza three
- **Capitalization** of 'Sorry' verse two stanza two
- **Idiom** in verse three stanza four
- **Alluding to** historical events
- **Alluding to** current world events
- **Juxtaposition** of listen (verse one stanza four) and silent (verse three stanza one).

Record your technique, example in the form of a quotation and analysis in the squares below. Report back to the class.



### Rapping it Up

- Create your own rap stanza, image or Wordle showing what you feel and hope for a world without racism.

