CLOSE TO THE EDGE: EXPLORING THE GLOBAL HIP HOP DIASPORA

Expressions of identity by South Sudanese hip hop artists in Melbourne, Australia.

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Abstract

Hip hop is a form of musical expression widely practiced among minority populations in global contexts and is used by them to express cultural identity. For diasporic communities, maintenance of a cultural identity is essential in retaining their histories, heritages and cultures in a foreign environment, and the aim of this study is to determine whether South Sudanese cultural identity is expressed through hip hop music. This study analyses the South Sudanese diaspora in Australia and seeks to answer the question 'Does hip hop music play a role in the expression of a cultural identity for South Sudanese Australians?' through a qualitative case study approach that examines the views held by two South Sudanese hip hop artists in Melbourne, Australia. Data gathered from two in-depth, semi-structured interviews indicates that South Sudanese cultural identity is not significantly expressed through hip hop, but rather through teaching South Sudanese history, heritage and culture to young members of the diaspora. The view of one participant suggests that hip hop plays a specific role in the expression of a South Sudanese cultural identity. The view of the other participant indicates that hip hop is more appropriately chosen to express blackness, suggesting an inherent quality of hip hop music that pertains more to the authenticity of racial identification rather than the transnationality of hip hop.

Introduction

In 2021, hip hop is one of the most popular global genres of music. Pioneered as an art form that facilitates the expression of marginalised

youth culture (Peters, McFayden, Dunn & George, 2016), hip hop has become central to many communities worldwide (Alim, Ibrahim & Pennycook, 2008). Among its range of functions, including political expression (Gosine & Tabi, 2016) and storytelling (Mitchell, 2006), it has the capacity to function as a vehicle for expressing and forming cultural identity (Clay, 2003; Lidskog, 2017; Warren & Evitt, 2010). This study derives its definition of cultural identity from Neville, Oyama, Odunewu & Huggins (2014), defining it as a sense of belonging to a community through shared history, heritage and culture.

Existing academic literature indicates a correlation between expressions of cultural identity within minority ethnic communities in Australia and performative practices within hip hop (Morgan & Warren, 2011). Amidst the rising population of South Sudanese in Australia after the nation's independence in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), hip hop has emerged as an accessible medium for youth expression among the South Sudanese community in Melbourne (Yates, 2017). Despite this, there is a current lack of scholarly research conducted on South Sudanese hip hop, and thus this study seeks to answer the question 'Does hip hop music play a role in the expression of a cultural identity for South Sudanese Australians?'

This study draws from literature that explores Indigenous Australian perspectives to explain how a dislocated minority ethnic community in Australia uses hip hop to express cultural identity. Building on this literature within the context of the South Sudanese diaspora in Australia, this study predicts that hip hop music does indeed play a role in the expression of a cultural identity for South Sudanese Australians. As a diaspora, it is paramount that South Sudanese maintain their cultural identity in their new place (Marlowe, 2013). By examining the views of two members of the diaspora, this study aims to provide insight into how the South Sudanese community upholds cultural identity in Australia.

Hip hop as an expression of minority cultural identity

Among various global destinations, Indigenous Australian communities have had a strong affinity towards hip hop music as a form of personal, cultural and political expression (Mitchell, 1998, 2006). Research into the New South Wales hip hop scene shows that the genre acts as a vehicle for expressing cultural identity in varying Indigenous Australian populations (Mitchell, 2006; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Warren & Evitt, 2010), serving as "a way of binding communities together through dance and performance, a declamatory form of storytelling set to music, and above all a means of expressing oral history" (Mitchell, 2006; p.

136). This assertion maintains that hip hop does not exist as an exclusive form limited to its founders, but rather as a form that can be borrowed and adapted by minority ethnic groups in need of expression (Pulido, 2009). The adaptation of hip hop music from an African American narrative to an Indigenous Australian narrative demonstrates how the genre's capacity of the genre to transcend national borders makes it an appurtenant art form for the expression of Aboriginality in Australia (Mitchell, 2006; Warren & Evitt, 2010).

In researching a collective of young Indigenous Australian hip hop artists in regional NSW, Warren and Evitt (2010) contend that hip hop music is used as a powerful tool to commemorate culture and heritage, effectively appropriating the genre for an expression of cultural identity outside of North America. Their findings indicate two primary social and cultural functions of Australian hip hop: to strengthen community and to escape marginality. Strong community is achieved through the recognition and pedagogy of Aboriginal Australian history through hip hop practices (Minestrelli, 2016; Warren & Evitt, 2010). Such practices, including rapping and graffiti writing, are also utilised by artists as means of distracting themselves from the effects of Indigenous Australia's recent history (for example, British colonisation, disinheritance and inter-generational trauma), while simultaneously repudiating social marginality (Minestrelli, 2016; Mitchell, 2006; Morgan & Warren, 2011).

While not diasporic but dislocated, Indigenous Australian communities provide an example of how hip hop's social and cultural functions act as means of expression for a marginalised youth community in Australia (Morgan & Warren, 2011; Warren & Evitt, 2010), and how such functions are significant in the expression of cultural identity (Minestrelli, 2016; Warren & Evitt, 2010).

The South Sudanese diaspora in Australia

In 2016, there were an estimated 12,548 people living in Australia who identified as having South Sudanese heritage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). During the Sudanese Civil War periods between 1956 and 2005, the country produced one of the fastest growing diasporic populations in the world (Marlowe, Harris & Lyons, 2013a). The civil wars' negative impact on the Ssouth's economic, social and governmental stability created a divide between the peoples of Sudan and resulted in the development of a newly designated political community ('South Sudan') that subsequently became a nation and then a state. The conflict between the northern and southern regions of Sudan ultimately led to the Ssouth gaining independence in 2011, consequently liberating itself from

its parent state which had restricted religious freedom and community values (O'Ballance, 2000). In this way, the need for a unique and distinct 'South Sudanese' cultural and national identity emerged (Marlowe, et al., 2013a).

As an emerging population in Australia, the peoples of South Sudan have made a conscious effort to maintain cultural identity through the recognition of national history, heritage, and community values (Losoncz, 2011). Examples are traditional wrestling events, or the Youth Festival held by South Sudanese Australia Youth United. The maintenance of culture has been shown to have importance in the affirmation of community and a sense of belonging (Losoncz, 2011; Neville, et al., 2014; Warren & Evitt, 2010), and is significant to South Sudanese migrants currently resettling in a foreign country (Marlowe, 2013; Robinson, 2011). The extension of culture from the past to the present as part of a collective group can enhance understanding and appreciation of a cultural identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995), and thus is an integral component in upholding the South Sudanese identity in Australia (Marlowe, et al., 2013b).

As previously discussed, hip hop has powerful applications for diasporic and minority ethnic communities in global contexts (Dawson, 2002; Lidskog, 2017; Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008; Mitchell, 1998). As an expressive medium, it collectively strengthens understandings of heritage, history and culture, and thus it is inferred that hip hop does play a role in the expression of a cultural identity for South Sudanese Australians. Positive assertions of culture also have the capacity to counteract unfavourable media representations of African communities (Nolan, Farquharson, Politoff & Marjoribanks, 2011; Nunn, 2010). Such assertions act in accordance with hip hop's observed social and cultural functions of strengthening community and escaping marginality (Pulido, 2009; Warren & Evitt, 2010), and are practiced by members of the South Sudanese community in Melbourne. Some examples of this are the songs "Dreams" by Titan Debirioun and "Usual Suspect" by Mac-Eleven, both by Melbourne-based South Sudanese hip hop artists. These tracks serve to counteract negative representations through negating stereotypes propagated in news media, in turn affirming community among South Sudanese Australians by positively asserting South Sudanese Australian identity.

Constructivism

The worldview underpinning this study is constructivism, as it holds that the goal of the researcher is to "understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt,

1994, p. 221). The constructivist researcher relies as much as possible on the individual's' subjective experience and attempts to generate an understanding of a phenomenon that is grounded primarily in the views of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Mertens, 2014). This is an effective approach when attempting to understand different perspectives of the same phenomenon, and as such it pertains strongly to the study of expression among minority ethnic communities. Constructivism also acknowledges that the personal experiences of the researcher may affect and shape the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2007). For this reason, an inductive case study approach is adopted to mitigate bias.

Case study

As its methodology, this research applies a case study approach. Case studies work with an intentionally small sample size, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in its natural setting (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Harling, 2012). This level of detail makes the approach suitable for the study of minority ethnic groups in hip hop (Gosine & Tabi, 2016), using the subjective experiences and voices of the participants as the basis for constructivist data analysis. While using a case study approach weakens any generalisation to a larger population, its ability to explore the complexity of the data obtained through qualitative methods makes it ideal for building foundational concepts surrounding the research issue. Semi-structured interviews are used as the data collection method in this study.

Method

Two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study; see the appendix for the list of set questions. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to respond to both set and unset questions in a detailed, subjective manner, eliciting high quality answers to the interview topic (Whiting, 2008). This qualitative method grants participants the freedom to derive their responses from experience or personal accounts, which is integral to constructivist studies in the social sciences discipline and is used effectively in existing studies conducted on hip hop and identity among dislocated populations (Morgan & Warren, 2011; Warren & Evitt, 2010). This method supports the performance of a case study methodology, as the depth of the interviews allows for the comprehensive analysis needed in a small-scale investigation.

To ensure the relevancy of the participants to the research, participants were required to be hip hop artists who were born in South Sudan or identify as South Sudanese. These criteria aimed to limit confounding variables in the study. The two participants interviewed in this study

were both male, aged 24 and 26. The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and were transcribed to a word processing application to aid the analysis.   All   primary   data collected in this study wereas analysed through an inductive lens and an adaptation of grounded theory coding practices (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The coding practice used in this study is based on the multiple-phase model of Charmaz (2006), in which the data goes through several phases of coding to reach a final theory or finding. However, in this research this wasis adapted to a few refined categories or central findings to adhere to the detailed nature of the case study methodology. In the first phase, the interview transcripts were analysed thoroughly for any claims or statements made by the participants and were coded descriptively. The later phases of coding involved the grouping of the initial codes into categories, and then further refining the categories into centrall findings of the study.

Findings

The role of hip hop music in the expression of South Sudanese cultural identity is contested

The participants differed in their perception of hip hop's role as a vehicle for expressing South Sudanese cultural identity. Participant M believed that hip hop music plays a role in his expression of his cultural identity, as he stated that "hip hop helps [him] tell [his South Sudanese] story". He recognised the importance of storytelling through hip hop as a way of strengthening community, as well as a means of enunciating South Sudanese identity beyond its diasporic confinement, claiming that hip hop "will help the masses understand [their] story and where [they are] from". Conversely, Participant W did not feel that hip hop had a role in the expression of his cultural identity, though he acknowledged its capacity for expressing cultural identity. He stated that culture and heritage

> are deeper topics, they're not for shallow rap music [...] for me as an artist, they're going to come later on down the track when I feel like I have the necessary tools and the audience for me to spread those messages that I want to spread.

While this statement indicates Participant W's perception of hip hop as a potential tool for expressing his cultural identity and story, it also highlights his choice to perform hip hop music as being unmotivated by his desire to express his South Sudanese cultural identity. Rather, he felt that he engaged with hip hop as "a hobby or activity [he] enjoy[s]".

Greater importance is placed on community engagement in expressing cultural identity

Community engagement was viewed by the participants as consisting of two components: teaching South Sudanese identity, and participation in cultural practices. For both participants, teaching was identified as a critical process in expressing South Sudanese cultural identity and heritage. When asked whether teaching and education were important in engaging the younger generations with their cultural identity and heritage, and thus contributing to the continuation of a collective cultural identity, Participant W responded positively, claiming that it is "the only way" to uphold South Sudanese cultural identity in Australia. He further stated that "if you know your history, you know yourself". Similarly, Participant M noted that "knowing where you're from will let you know where you're going", claiming that knowledge of history, heritage and culture helps a person of South Sudanese background to "know where [they] belong". He suggested that young South Sudanese Australians who do not have an understanding of their heritage or history "can't really have a sense of belonging", as he held that teaching heritage and national history to younger generations of South Sudanese Australians was central to expressing cultural identity within the community. When asked if knowledge of history and heritage was important for connecting to South Sudanese identity, Participant M said,

> are deeper topics, they're not for shallow rap music [...] for me as an artist, they're going to come later on down the track when I feel like I have the necessary tools and the audience for me to spread those messages that I want to spread.

When asked the same question, Participant W responded that education on history and heritage is something that should be made standard across the board, you know, even just for black people in general, history is a very important thing because it defines a lot of who you are. Participant W later stated that knowledge of one's heritage "would be needed for the younger generation" in order to feel a sense of belonging to the South Sudanese community in Australia, although he acknowledged its importance in broader, less specific context, as indicated by the above excerpt. Similarly, engaging in community cultural practices such as dancing and wrestling that "bring the South Sudanese community together" (Participant M, 2019) is fundamental to expressing South Sudanese cultural identity. Participation in cultural practices was seen by both participants to be a "major part" of their South Sudanese cultural identity. This sense of belonging to a community is

the principle of cultural identity and was perceived by both participants to be acquired most strongly through education in their South Sudanese history, heritage and culture, as well as participation in cultural practices; 'education' here meant the process of learning rather than the process of acquiring knowledge in a formal setting. Hip hop was acknowledged by participants W and M as a form of communication and expression of 'story' which has a capacity for conveying history and heritage, buthowever greater emphasis was placed on community engagement and teaching as methods of upholding South Sudanese cultural identity.

Hip hop is desired for its expression of blackness

For Participant W, hip hop did not play a role in the expression of his South Sudanese cultural identity. Rather, hip hop was perceived by him to be an expression of his 'blackness'. He describes hip hop as "an expression of black struggles" and a medium that "tells the story of black people". He felt that by making hip hop music, he was representing his blackness both directly and indirectly through participation in a culturally black music genre that transcends ethnicity, geography and imperialism. He states,

> Being here in Australia, I'm representing black people, and that's important to do in the world because we have such a large community and we are in society just as much as anyone else, so yeah.

And,

> [Hip hop] tells the story of black people, which is something I want to do with my music. And hip hop has that kind of culture as well, it's always been about expression.

Participant W considered the creation of hip hop music a method of consolidating his feeling of community with other black or African people in Australia, claiming that because "hip hop is pretty much something that recorded black struggle", it is "something that a lot of black people in general find themselves to resonate with". These comments display his view that hip hop can more closely strengthen his connection to a black community. Although he felt a connection to a South Sudanese community in Melbourne, he emphasised a greater connection to a broader African diaspora instead. He believed that "black people in general need to feel a sense of community", highlighting a precedence he gives to his blackness over his South Sudanese cultural identity when expressing himself through hip hop music.

Hence, it follows that what Participant W considered as valuable in his hip hop expression was hip hop's intrinsic advocacy of blackness. He felt that black communities still needed to enunciate their identity as being black, and that given hip hop's history as a "black art form", this identity could be expressed firmly through hip hop expression. Within this, hip hop's expression of black struggles made it desirable as a way for a collective community to escape social marginality. Participant W remarked that "it just matters that [one is] black" when engaging with hip hop as a vehicle for expression.

Discussion

Despite hip hop's ability to express South Sudanese cultural identity, the participants maintained that teaching history, heritage and culture was more critical to expressing and upholding South Sudanese cultural identity in Australia. Scholars have also indicated the importance of teaching heritage and history for dislocated or diasporic communities (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Minestrelli, 2016; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Neville, et al., 2014), and as such, it pertains to the South Sudanese diaspora in Australia.

In diasporic contexts, collective memories play a fundamental role in establishing a sense of belonging and are central to the formation of cultural identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; McDowell, 2016; Neville, et al., 2014). In Assmann and Czaplicka's (1995) concept of collective or cultural memory, communities that have a collective understanding of cultural components such as heritage and history can maintain cultural identity while still possessing diasporic status. Teaching collective memories, usually orally, can facilitate a shared understanding of a group's heritage and history (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Hall, 1994; Neville, et al., 2014); this was identified by the participants as a process that "bring[s] the community together" (Participant M, 2019) (Mitchell, 2006). Furthermore, cultural identity was not identified as being significantly expressed through "shallow rap music" (Participant W, 2019), thus highlighting a distinction between hip hop and teaching as methods of expressing South Sudanese cultural identity.

As oral teaching practices are directly grounded in the South Sudanese community's expressions of history, heritage and culture, these practices have a more fundamental impact than hip hop on the maintenance of South Sudanese cultural identity in Australia (Frahm, 2012; Marlowe, et al., 2013b; Robinson, 2011). While hip hop was acknowledged as a vehicle with the capacity to "bring the community together" (Participant M, 2019) (Mitchell, 2006; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Pulido, 2009; Warren & Evitt, 2010), it was generally perceived by the participants

as an exogenous practice concerned with establishing South Sudanese identity as part of a broader society. Thus, the cultural function of hip hop to strengthen community, posited by Warren and Evitt (2010), did not wholly apply to the participants. For the participants, history, heritage and culture were more appropriately accessed through informal education practices (Neville, et al., 2014) and participation in traditional cultural practices (Mitchell, 2006; Neville, et al., 2014) – methods of expression which created the "strongest sense of belonging" (Participant M, 2019) (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Neville, et al., 2014). Despite Mitchell's (2006) contention that hip hop is an important vehicle for expressing history, heritage and culture among minority ethnic populations, the participants assigned this role of expression to teaching and cultural practices.

Hip hop was perceived by the participants to provide a platform to express their identity as well as to positively assert themselves against racial injustices (Gosine & Tabi, 2016; Mitchell, 2006; Pulido, 2009). Participant M remarked on his "voice" in the community, stating that he felt a duty to address the misrepresentation of South Sudanese Australians through his engagement with hip hop. He regarded the South Sudanese community as "vilified in the media" – reinforcing the view of Nolan et al. (2011) and Nunn (2010) – and believed that hip hop has the capacity to act as a means of "counter[ing] these representations", thus rejecting marginality while positively asserting identity as part of a socially marginalised community (Morgan & Warren, 2011; Pulido, 2009; Warren & Evitt, 2010). Similar to the studies of Gosine and Tabi (2016) and Pulido (2009), hip hop was seen by both participants to be a vehicle for rejecting social marginality through the expression of an experienced, lived and acknowledged racial injustice.

The primary value assigned to hip hop by the participants was its ability to express identities in need of enunciation (Morgan & Warren, 2011). For the South Sudanese identity, the need to be enunciated was ascribed to the age and status of Africa's newest state as a resettling diaspora in Australia (Marlowe, et al., 2013a, 2013b). Participant M stated that South Sudan is "still new but [has] a lot to offer to the world", highlighting the need for his South Sudanese nationality to be enunciated and appreciated by wider communities. He considered hip hop as a method of "telling the world who [they] are" and "help[ing] the masses understand [their] story". From this, hip hop's nature as a device "for storytelling and getting information across" (Participant W, 2019) makes it suitable for asserting this young identity, simultaneously counteracting the discrimination affecting South Sudanese as a minority

ethnic community in Australia (Nolan, et al., 2011; Nunn, 2010). However, this function of hip hop was viewed by the participants as an assertion of South Sudanese identity which was exogenous to the communal maintenance of South Sudanese cultural identity in Australia.

Participant W held that hip hop was valuable to him as an expression of his 'blackness', maintaining that it is something he felt hip hop inherently promotes. Bennett's (1999) ethnography of a group of white British youth who perform hip hop music suggests that although hip hop is not exclusively black in its application, hip hop pertains most strongly to black communities as an authentic expression of their racial identity (Clay, 2003; Rose, 1994).

The concept of authenticity in hip hop is often discussed among scholars as a key aspect of engaging with the genre (Clay, 2003; McLeod, 1999; Pennycook, 2007), and is typically tied to black participation in hip hop (Clay, 2003; Rose, 1994). By identifying as black, expression through hip hop becomes more 'authentic', as the artist performs hip hop as a way of stating blackness by connecting to hip hop's black history (Clay, 2003; Rose, 1994). Participant W's view builds on Clay's (2003) thesis by extending hip hop's relevancy beyond African Americans to other black communities, stating that "black people in general will relate" to hip hop. This idea of a universal black connection to hip hop can be seen in various studies concerning hip hop expression outside of America (Gosine & Tabi, 2016; Mitchell, 2006; Warren & Evitt, 2010). While these studies are not concerned with the significance of the participants' blackness in their engagement with hip hop, the communities investigated all identified as racially black. This correlates with Participant W's view in highlighting the salience of being black in engaging with hip hop music as a form of expression (Clay, 2003).

Furthermore, Beaman's (2017) concept of transnational blackness was apparent in the view of Participant W; the participant contended that black communities globally were interconnected through shared "black history". It was ultimately his perception of hip hop's relevance to these interconnected black communities that determined his engagement with the genre; in turn, this demonstrates an inherent relationship between hip hop music and being black (Clay, 2003; McLeod, 1999; Rose, 1994). However, this challenges the views of Clay (2003) and Rose (1994) who argue for cultural exclusivity in African American hip hop, suggesting that the 'blackness' of hip hop is transnational.

Conclusion

This case study indicates that hip hop music plays a mixed role in the expression of South Sudanese cultural identity; the participants

offered contrasting viewpoints on its application as an expression of their history, heritage and culture. One participant viewed hip hop as a means for expressing his cultural identity, whereas the other participant ascribed it as having the capacity for cultural expression. Both participants demonstrated the precedence given to teaching and traditional cultural practices as means of maintaining South Sudanese cultural identity in Australia (Losoncz, 2011; Marlowe, et al., 2013b), as well as establishing a sense of belonging.

The participants' views suggested that hip hop was mainly significant as an exogenous practice for enunciating race and nationality (Gosine & Tabi, 2016; Pulido, 2009), and thus was not pursued for its capacity to establish a sense of belonging within the South Sudanese community in Australia. The differences in participant motivation to engage with hip hop also emphasise different perceptions of hip hop's purpose as a genre of expression. One participant held that hip hop was desirable as a tool for expressing his South Sudanese cultural identity. The unexpected importance of blackness in hip hop engagement (Clay, 2003; Rose, 1994) raised by the other participant suggests that hip hop may be more broadly related to being black, rather than being a universal tool for expressing cultural identity.

Although the participants provided insight and information that sustained a discussion about South Sudanese cultural identity and varying applications of hip hop music, the range of viewpoints available for analysis in this study was limited. Further research would benefit from a wider sample size and a deeper ethnography involving participant observations and focus groups to corroborate or reject the findings of this study. Future studies also may wish to further investigate blackness as it pertains to global hip hop communities.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

The following is the list of set questions asked in both interviews. This list excludes any unexpected or improvised questions asked as a result of the semi-structured nature of the interviews.

1) Tell me about yourself and your music.
2) What does hip hop music mean to you?
   a. Is hip hop something that allows you to express yourself?
3) Describe your connection to South Sudan.
   a. Is this connection an essential part of your identity?
   b. Is this connection something that you can communicate through hip hop?
4) What do you know of South Sudanese independence?
5) Is it important for people who have come from South Sudan to Australia to maintain or express their ethnicity?
6) Would you say that your heritage is important to who you are?
7) Does creating hip hop music help you understand your heritage?
   a. Has hip hop helped you feel more in touch with your heritage?
8) Do you think that hip hop is important in understanding your cultural background?
   a. Does hip hop help you to create a strong bond with your South Sudanese identity?
9) Does creating hip hop music allow you to express your culture?
   a. Is there any incorporation of hip hop into South Sudanese cultural practices that you know of?
10) Does the performance of hip hop practices help you feel a sense of belonging to a certain community?
    a. Do you feel like you connect with a South Sudanese community in Melbourne?

11) To what extent has African American hip hop influenced your engagement with the genre?
12) Do you feel like hip hop has allowed you to understand and/or define your cultural identity?
    a.   Do you think that hip hop is a universal tool for the expression of identity?
    b.   Is there anything that contributes more greatly to your cultural identity than hip hop?