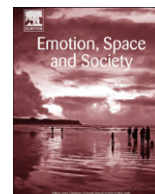


Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

Rap, rhythm and recognition: Lyrical practices and the politics of voice on a community music project for young people experiencing challenging circumstances

Luke Dickens^{a,*}, Douglas Lonie^b

^a Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross SE14 6NW, United Kingdom

^b The National Foundation for Youth Music, London SE1 ONE, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 April 2012

Received in revised form

27 October 2012

Accepted 17 November 2012

Keywords:

Rap music

Lyrical practices

Politics of voice

Young people

Youth music

Youth work

ABSTRACT

Given the prominence of rap music and its influence in debates about the moral status of young people, this paper seeks to highlight young people's own lyrical practices and interpretations of the genre. Evidence gathered by the National Foundation for Youth Music has found that such lyrical modes of music making can serve as a vital means of self-expression, particularly for those children and young people who otherwise lack confidence, self-esteem and cultural validation. This paper centres on a detailed case study of a community music project called *Ustudios*, which drew on peer-mentoring practices to develop and record rap lyrics with local young people who were identified as experiencing a range of challenging circumstances while residing on two adjacent council estates on the outskirts of Brighton, England. By tracing the lyrical practices of a group of young participants, this paper establishes a clear sense of their potential to explore their own voice, both as means to enhance their emotional expression and development, and as a way of supporting their participation as active members within their community. Taken alongside wider evidence, this case develops an emerging thesis on the political significance of voice, listening and recognition for reframing understandings of the emotional geographies of young people.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Discussing the possible reasons for the outbreak of rioting across English cities in August 2011, the *Daily Mail* journalist Paul Routledge was clear about what he believed to be the source of the problem: "I blame the pernicious culture of hatred around rap music, which glorifies violence and loathing of authority" (Routledge, 2011). In the same week, the historian David Starkey took up this line of argument in a notably unctuous exchange on the BBC's *Newsnight* programme,¹ while the Prime Minister David Cameron released a press statement that noted "We have to await the conclusion of the police investigation. But Snoop Dogg has some serious questions to answer" (cited in Eaton, 2011).²

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: urbanmargins@gmail.com (L. Dickens), douglas.lonie@youthmusic.org.uk (D. Lonie).

¹ Broadcast on BBC 2, 12/08/11. Fellow discussants were Owen Jones, the author of *Chavs: the Demonisation of the Working Class* (2011), and Dreda Say Mitchell, a writer, broadcaster and journalist. For Dreda's later written response to David Starkey's argument, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/14/david-starkey-ethnic-year-zero>.

² See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots/>.

Unsurprisingly, liberal journalists took a different stance, pointing out that rap music presented a positive response to the riots themselves (Hancox, 2011), and that while 'black music' was indeed enjoying mainstream popularity with young people, "it may come as a surprise to Starkey that the MCs who have achieved this unprecedented success have not done so by inciting violence but by being open-minded, industrious and positive" (Goodwin, 2011).

In many ways, these public commentaries were the latest rehearsal of a perennial moral argument concerning the apparently 'deviant' status of young people and youth culture in contemporary society (Cohen, 1972; Valentine, 1996). From a conservative perspective, the rioting was considered to be the result of gangs of 'feral' youth passively motivated through a particular conflation of rap music and US Gangsta culture. In contrast, liberal commentary positioned rap music as a cultural articulation of individual and group identity, and emotional resilience and solidarity; ultimately reflecting the challenging social conditions that many young people were experiencing. Thus despite later research showing a more nuanced picture of the demographics and motivations of those who by varying degrees actually participated in the English urban riots than was possible at the time (Guardian/LSE, 2012; Singh et al., 2011, 2012), the dimensions of this early public

response nonetheless reiterated a number important questions about young people's cultural and political status in British society today. While the racial overtones of this debate would themselves certainly merit further critical examination in a UK context, particularly for the ways they might compare with the cultural politics of 'black music' as a critical response to racism, stigma and exclusion in the US (Neal, 1998; Rose, 1994), this paper is instead concerned with the ways this ready attribution of rap music with inciting anger, hatred and violence in young people represented a profound misrecognition of the broad range of emotional, expressive registers that the listening to, and making of, rap music might entail for young people themselves.

From the perspective of the National Foundation for Youth Music (Youth Music), a national charity supporting non-formal music education³ in England, the prominence given to the role of rap music in such debates presented a timely opportunity for deeper reflection beyond the ways young people might be influenced by listening to rap music, and towards their own creative practices and interpretations of the genre. Indeed, Youth Music had recently commissioned several reviews of available evidence that examined young people's lyrical practices on a range of funded music making projects. These found that lyrics served as potent signifiers of youth identities, that lyrical development could be key to improvements in levels of literacy and numeracy, and crucially here, that vocal and lyrical modes of music making could serve as a vital means of self-expression for those who had felt themselves to be otherwise lacking in confidence, self-esteem and cultural validation (Daykin et al., 2011; Dillon, 2010; Qa Research, 2011). While these findings related to a diversity of both musical styles and the demographics of young participants, they were strongly reflected on projects that focused on rap and hip hop music making with children and young people experiencing challenging circumstances, or living in areas characterised by multiple forms of deprivation.

This paper takes this evidence as a starting point for considering the influence of rap music, both in terms that might address the contested politics of representation and identity bound up in the media commentaries above, alongside a somewhat less visible – and less audible – account of young people's lyrical practices in their own forms of rap music. Specifically, in an effort to foreground the affordances of lyrical expression, this paper presents a detailed examination of the ways writing, rehearsing, recording and performing rap lyrics can support young people's individual and collective emotional development at a pivotal stage in their lives (Valentine, 2003). Moreover, taking the lyrical as a distinct practice of representation, it suggests ways that young people's own narrative accounts, both within and about their own forms of rap music, can inform a more reflexive, felt appreciation of the everyday social worlds they inhabit. Ultimately, this paper seeks to advance an affective politics of voice by recognising how young people's lyrical expressions might resonate through the musical and towards accessible and supportive modes of participation, inclusion and cultural citizenship (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Andrew et al., 2005; Kanngieser, 2012; Stevenson, 2001, 2003, 2011).

The next section outlines the methodological touchstones for this research, giving further context to the apparent synergies between Youth Music's approach to music making with children and young people, and work by scholars variously concerned with children's music making, emotional geographies and the politics of voice. Section Three then addresses the considerations set out above through

a detailed case study of a community music project called *Ustudios*. This project drew on peer-mentoring practices to develop and record rap lyrics with local young people who were identified as experiencing a range of challenging circumstances residing on two adjacent council estates on the outskirts of Brighton, a town on the south east coast of England. By tracing the lyrical practices of a group of young participants, this paper establishes a clear sense of their potential to explore their own voice, both as means to enhance their emotional expression and development, and as a way of supporting their participation as active members within their community. Taken alongside wider evidence, this case develops an emerging thesis on the political significance of voice, listening and recognition for reframing understandings of the emotional geographies of young people.

2. Musical methodologies: young people's lyrical practices, emotional geographies and the politics of voice

Youth Music was founded in 1999 to support the musical, personal and social development of children and young people aged 0–18 across England. Its charitable mission, "to help young people make the most of their lives through the power of music", is rooted in the traditions of community music, and is approached through the provision of funds, learning and other resources to the non-formal music education sector. Since its establishment, the charity has provided music making opportunities for over two million children and young people, and, at the time of writing, had worked with over 177,000 participants in the previous year through the activities of 212 funded projects and organisations (see Lonie and Dickens, 2011). This paper explores charitable activity that falls primarily within one of Youth Music's four strategic goal areas, specifically that intended "to increase effective provision of high quality music making in places of identified disadvantage and for children and young people in the most challenging circumstances".

2.1. Young people's emotional development and lyrical practices: national and international evidence

The assumptions about young people expressed in the media commentaries outlined above point sharply towards a need for more empirically informed consideration of the ways young people might themselves understand their engagement with forms of rap music. Here, the ongoing evaluative work of Youth Music is a valuable source of knowledge, although it is important to acknowledge that a music education charity publishing the results of internal research with its own projects is not independent or peer-reviewed. Nonetheless, the forms of evidence that Youth Music has sought to compile are important precisely because they focus on musical activity with so called 'at risk' groups of children and young people, particularly those variously defined as 'looked after' or 'in care', 'young offenders' or those deemed 'at-risk' of offending, certain groups within those defined as 'not in employment, education or training' or those with 'special educational needs'. As a result of developing such approaches, it has been possible for the charity to establish an evidence-base into the ways children living in areas of identified disadvantage or experiencing complex challenging circumstances might develop personally and socially, as well as musically (Daykin et al., 2011; Deane et al., 2011; Dickens, 2010; Dillon, 2010; Lonie and Dickens, 2011; Qa Research, 2011).⁴

³ 'Non-formal' music education is defined as that which occurs beyond the mainstream school curriculum or other formal learning structures and environments such as the grades awarded under the Associated Board of the Royal School of Musicians.

⁴ Youth Music's emphasis on challenging circumstances is intended to avoid deficit models that pathologise or otherwise attach responsibility to children themselves (such as defining them as 'hard to reach'). Youth Music also recognise the problematic nature of such labels and therefore understand such circumstances as highly complex, non-definitive and different for each individual child.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7323445>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7323445>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)