

Student Devised Assessment: Accompanying Piece

Topic: Can UK rap be utilised to engage with a critical perspective of the way black people are stereotyped in Britain?

Aim: Create a song that encapsulates the perception of rap and black people and how these are harmful.

Target Audience: Black British people who listen to rap music.

Introduction

"The Scene" is a song that I wrote which addresses the harmful stereotypes of black people in Britain and of rap music as being associated with aggression. The song endeavours to depict how harmful these stereotypes are and offers a counter argument which resists the stereotyping. The aim of "The Scene" is to create a conversation on perception versus reality of black people and rap music and allow listeners to resonate with the message and explores perceptions of self and others in their own lives.

Topic

Music has always been a part of who I am and has contributed positively to my wellbeing by providing a route to cathartic experiences, much like Virginia Woolf explains on her writing of "To the Lighthouse" (Bell, 1986). Whilst I am eclectic, one of my favourite genres of music is rap, more specifically UK rap, and I often see that the genre gains a lot of negative attention which I think is often unjustified. I see rap like I see any other genre of music: as a means of expression. Songs like "Broski" (Krept and Konan) have helped me navigate feelings of loss and albums like "Psychodrama" have deeply resonated with me. The album comes from Dave, one of my favourite UK rappers, a young lyricist who has taken the country by storm. It deals with a variety of pertinent issues including racial trauma, racial identity, and domestic violence against women. The album integrates excerpts of Dave's therapy sessions within songs as he takes the listener through a journey (Dave, 2019). One of the songs on the album is "Black", which speaks to the experience of black people in Britain, is especially important to me and demonstrates how as Jernigan et al state, 'racial trauma is a cumulative experience' and is generational.

Learning about wellbeing and failure introduced me to new ways of thinking about failure. Where my perspective focused on individualised conceptualisations, I was introduced to social wellbeing and societal failure. Heron's (0.32-0.38) words on the benefits of seeing failure as an 'opportunity for learning creativity and resistance' were pertinent. My love for music, constantly navigating my black British identity, the negative perceptions of rap in the UK and my critical lens of society and societal wellbeing led me to create this song.

"The Scene" Lyrics

"The Scene" (Lyrics in Appendix) documents the perception of black people and music in Britain and how damaging this can be. 'When they see us' is a reoccurring line throughout the whole song and is used both metaphorically and literally. It is a reference to Ava DuVernay's show "When They See Us" (2019) which depicts the story of Kevin, Raymond, Antron, Yusef and Korey who were wrongly accused of a brutal crime and spent time in prison which destroyed their lives. The line is recurrent in my song because it reminds the listener of the damage that can be done when black people are stereotyped and the real-life implications of these perceptions. The first verse goes through negative perceptions of black people and rap music and then the second verse flips the perspective and shows what differences could be made if black people were seen differently.

Audience and Song as a Medium

The intended audience for “The Scene” is black British people who already listen and engage with rap music and who may experience racial trauma. I think that a rap song is the best way to reach this audience as it will reach those who love the genre and want to reflect on their experiences with it and being black. As Timothy (2018) discusses, racism can affect us ‘physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, transnationally and transgenerationally’ and it is not always clear how to deal with the trauma that you experience and can be frustrating when there is no one person to look to when systemic issues are to blame. When thinking about these different ways that racial trauma impact us, specifically at how black people are sometimes perceived in Britain, I wanted to write something that looks at some of the narratives involved in the typification of black people and then challenge it in order for the song to resonate with the intended listener. Music is a useful way to engage with this perspective and proves useful when dealing with racial trauma (Miller, 2020). The report “Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing” (AGAHW, 2017) details the positive effects of the arts on wellbeing and it has been used to cope with mental health issues with people depicting their struggles in drawings (The Guardian, 2018), creating projects where rap and spoken word can be utilised as a means to enhance mental health (Klein and Walker) and in the treatment of mental health conditions for refugees (Ugurlu et al, 2016:97). Scientific research on music shows that it ‘can enhance one’s moods, emotions, and other psychological states’ and ‘calm neural activity’, thus having a positive impact on wellbeing. (Stuckey and Nobel, 2010:254,255).

Perceptions of Rap

Whilst rap in Britain has various sub-genres within it, Grime and Drill are two distinct forms within the British rap scene which are well known. The former inspired by Garage and dancehall music and the latter influenced by American drill music and notably famous for often violent imagery. The Criminologist perspective on policing and racism has taken interest in the policing of rap music in Britain and Fatsis (2018:7,13) argues that the “incomprehensibility” of Black (British) culture is routinely blamed on stereotypes about problematic family structures, culture, and values’ and that music such as Grime actually serves as ‘a provocative musical genre that alerts audiences to iniquities in our socio-political arrangements’. In an article on the perceptions of Drill music, Beaumont-Thomas (2018) attempted to give a nuanced account of the sub-genre. When describing its origins, he linked Chicago’s black populace to London’s where he states it ‘has arguably been left to fend for itself and descended into violence’. The unintended demonising lexical choice contained here perpetuates harmful generalisations about black working class people and this is exactly what “The Scene” aims to counter.

It is undeniable that there is a relationship between gang culture and the Drill. Nevertheless, as Leynes et al (2020:1201,1202) points out, it is important to ‘avoid reductive accounts of this relationship’ and not ‘reaffirm’ that ‘forms of culture that appear tied to this population—constitute a threat to the civic mainstream.’ A reductive view also does not account for influential drill artists such as Loski (2020) who have a criminal past but has had a musical evolution which now depicts his environment and the problems within it and his actions. His album “Music, Trial and Trauma: A Drill Story” depicts this complex relationship. Perception matters as it is interrelated with how black culture is negatively perceived in society. As an avid concert goer for all music genres, I have seen the way black concert crowds are treated with often hostile decked out security versus ones with mostly white crowds which only check ID, despite there being issues around drug use in for example Drum n Bass venues. Form 696, whilst now revoked, embodied these same discriminatory practices. The form was supposed to allow a ‘risk assessment’ to be carried out for an event but predominately targeted rap concerts which resulted in a lot of shows being shut down (BBC News, 2017). Academic and rapper Akala, has continually spoken out about the harmful effects of racialised criminality and the impact on perceptions of self for black people in Britain (GMB 2019). “The Scene” allows the

listener to engage with these critical views on perceptions of self and use music to navigate emotions.

Rap as Resistance

One of the main points of “The Scene” is to show that black people are not just one thing and rap can actually serve as a means to impact positively on communities and has the capability to contribute to making things better (Cashmore, 2014). Sociological understandings of rap place the genre as responding to ‘dominant hegemonic frameworks’ (Martinez, 1997:279). Philosophical understandings of wellbeing allowed me to delve into, and develop, my understanding of emotions (Week Seven). It proved crucial in being able to reflect on whether anger had a place within resistance to racial stereotyping within rap. It has been argued that anger is not a good emotion to have by Philosophers such as Seneca and it should not be the foundation of ‘moral or political decisions’ (BBC, 2019:0.39) but I believe as Cherry (2020) states, that anger is ‘politically and morally’ useful in contributing positively to society. Psychological accounts of anger also take this view (Ackerman, 2021) and Pierce (2018) differentiates between different types of anger and views resistance to racial trauma rooted in anger as ‘righteous’. Anger is an emotion which was integrated within the essence of some of the lyrics of “The Scene” to demonstrate how experiences of racial trauma can make you feel but it is not the only emotion displayed, and has an essence which is founded upon resistance and can allow a listener to engage with their different emotions.

Conclusion

“The Scene” provides an artistic platform to engage with the effects of racial trauma on black people in Britain and provides a narrative which resists harmful rhetoric that is intertwined within the stereotyping of black people and rap. Through listening to this song and engaging with the lyrics, listeners can start or continuing to critically engage with the perceptions of black people and form their own means of communicating what this means to them.

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