

“Finding my Blackness, Finding my Rhythm”: Music and Identity Development in African, Caribbean, and Black Emerging Adults

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Abstract

This study examines how music functions in relation to identity development for African-, Caribbean- and Black-identified emerging adults who have immigrated to Canada. Eleven ACB-identified emerging adults, recruited from music schools, community, and student organizations took part in semi-structured interviews adapted from McAdams' Life Story Interview protocol to focus on music practices and memories. Thematic Analyses results suggest that transitioning to life in Canada necessitated learning new meanings of being and “becoming” Black. Participants described the influence of music on negotiating identity in a Canadian context. They described using music to resist racist and hegemonic narratives of Canadian Black identity, to connect to and celebrate their embodied Black identities, and establish self-continuity and coherence across histories and generations to connect with spiritual memories, land, and ancestors. We conclude by suggesting implications of this work for practice and developing research methodologies that resist whiteness.

Keywords

music, narrative identity, Black identity, African- Caribbean- and Black-identified, immigration, Canada, racism, emerging adult

Despite its reputation as a land of relative equality, Canada has a violent history of enslavement and ongoing legacies of anti-Black racism (Maynard, 2017). Racial profiling in schools and communities, experiences of violence, disproportionate representation in the justice and child welfare systems, and silenced histories are woven into the racialized Black experience in Canada (Cole, 2020; Maynard, 2017; Mullings et al., 2016; Pon, 2009; Pon et al., 2011). Legacies of enslavement continue to shape the experiences of many African, Caribbean- and Black-identified (ACB) Canadian communities. While much of the research on ACB emerging adults focuses on U.S. populations, it is critical to understand the experiences of ACB young adults in Canadian contexts (e.g., Gooden & Hackett, 2012; Hasford, 2016; Litchmore et al., 2016; Medina et al., 2019). Our research examines identity development in ACB-identified emerging adults living in Southern Ontario. As we describe further below, we focus on young adults who have immigrated to Canada and examine a particular aspect of life narratives: stories about the music that has been meaningful in participants' lives. While most research on narrative identity has focused on oral stories told according to dominant “Western” (i.e., White, European) cultural traditions of

storytelling, in this study we expand the narrative frame to examine identity development via interactions with music.

Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood

Narrative approaches to identity emphasize that identity is constructed and communicated through stories (McAdams, 1993), including the stories we tell about ourselves as well as other people's stories that are encountered in one's narrative ecology (Breen et al., 2016; McLean, 2015). Identity stories reveal the relationship between self and society, the individual and collective, and the present and historical (McLean & Breen, 2016;

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Ngo, 2008). Identity processes tend to be intensified during adolescence and emerging adulthood, as young people are actively engaged in developing their self-concept, constructing identity, and finding their place in society (e.g., Arnett, 2007). At this stage, identity coherence becomes especially relevant, as individuals strive to construct an identity that brings together the past, present, and future into a sense of a unified and coherent self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). For racialized Black youth, ethno-cultural and racial identity may be especially important for positive development (e.g., Anucha et al., 2017; Loyd & Williams, 2017; Neblett et al., 2012; Sellers et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2003). Strong connections to ethnic groups can mediate the impacts of anti-Black racism and discrimination, while increasing academic achievement and promoting well-being (e.g., Baffoe, 2011; Codjoe, 2001; Neblett et al., 2013; Way et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2003).

The literature on narrative identity development has focused predominantly on personal narratives in written and oral forms. However, music may be an especially important artistic form and social context for making meaning of the memories, imaginings, and longings that constitute personal and collective identity (Vila, 2014). The various components of music—sounds, lyrics, performance, and even musical artists themselves—may reflect identity and provide contexts for identity exploration. While the study of music and identity from a narrative perspective is relatively novel and not well represented in the developmental literature, there is a wealth of literature that examines music and identity from other theoretical vantage points. A fulsome review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article, but we provide a brief review below.

Music and Identity

Music is deeply connected to emotion and memory (Amir, 2012; DeNora, 2000; Lippman & Greenwood, 2012; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007; Robertson, 2004). Listening to, sharing, and performing music can be a way of expressing or understanding identity and telling a story to others, particularly when the lyrics or sounds are connected to an individual's sense of self (Amir, 2012; Miranda, 2013; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2007). Musical experiences are often embedded with memories of significant people and situations (Amir, 2012; Cohen, 2013; Hennion, 2010; Hoeven, 2018; Lippman & Greenwood, 2012; Roy & Dowd, 2010). Music also provides connections to group identity. For example, Cohen (2013) highlighted that memories of local rock music from individuals residing in Liverpool, England were attached to the local identity of the people as well as their cultural heritage. From this standpoint, music and the memories associated with it are instrumental in defining the identities of an individual or group of people.

Music and Resistance

Music is a tool by which individuals and groups can negotiate identity (Robertson, 2004). Throughout history music has been used as a response to oppression and alienation—a way to

reform group identity and resist harmful social labels (Brown, 1995; Rose, 2007). In the words of Rajs (2007):

Music can literally give voice to the powerless to label themselves and to express their existence as a group and their “nature” in contexts where the powerful either do not acknowledge their existence or label and identify them in ways they find objectionable (p. 31).

From a narrative standpoint, the choices that we make about music can provide a way to position ourselves in relation to “master narratives” (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2016); these are “culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture and provide guidance for how to be a “good” member of a culture” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 320). We can align our musical interests with dominant master narratives, or we can use music as a means for resistance.

Music and Migration

As people travel, they carry music with them (Baily & Collyer, 2006; Sardinha & Campos, 2016). As such, music plays an important role in migrant and diaspora experiences (Baily & Collyer, 2006; Slobin, 1994) and it can be a tool for dealing with the difficult and sometimes painful experiences of immigration (Elias et al., 2011). Music is a tool for conjuring and re-living the memories, stories, and narratives of immigrants and connecting them to the present (Baily & Collyer, 2006; Clary-Lemon, 2010; Elias et al., 2011; Gigi Durham, 2004; Hoeven, 2018; Olsen, 2004; Sardinha, 2016). For diaspora communities and second-generation immigrants, music can provide ways to share experiences and relate to other people across cultures, and contribute to a sense of belonging (de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Elias et al., 2011; Rothchild, 2016). Music may also be indicative of the extent of integration into a new cultural context; Elias et al., (2011) nicely encapsulate this idea in their quote “Tell me the music you listen to and I will tell you how many years you have resided in the host country” (p. 74).

In this exploratory study, we examined ACB-identified emerging adults' life stories in music. Our research was guided by the following question: How does music function in relation to identity development for ACB-identified emerging adults who have immigrated to Canada? We situate this question within the frame of being Black in Canada. We focused on young people who have migrated from one culture to another because we expected that immigration would provide increased awareness of and an ability to articulate dominant master narratives of Blackness in Canada. As such, our research was also guided by the question, how do ACB-identified emerging adults who have immigrated to Southern Ontario experience being Black in this context? While previous research has demonstrated connections between music and identity, resistance and migration (e.g., Elias et al., 2011; Rajs, 2007; Vila, 2014), the uniqueness of this study lies in our focus on ACB emerging adults in a Canadian context, and in our utilization of a master narrative approach.

Table 1. Interview Guiding Questions.

| Interview Element | Guiding Questions and Prompts |
|------------------------------|--|
| Warm-Up | How often do you listen to music? In what contexts? |
| Adapted Life Story Interview | Thinking back over your life (including childhood, adolescence, and recent years), is there music that stands out for you that is especially memorable? Childhood: What do you remember most about music in childhood? What songs stand out for you? What makes these especially memorable or meaningful for you? Adolescence: What do you remember most about music in this period? What songs stand out for you? What makes these especially memorable or meaningful for you? More recent—the last 5 years, or since age 18: What do you remember most about music in this period? What songs stand out for you? What makes these especially memorable or meaningful for you? |
| Life Story in Music | If you could tell your life story using music, what music would you use? Why is this music important to you? |
| Music and Immigration | Is there music that is especially memorable or meaningful to you in your experience immigrating? Is there music that reminds you of home? Why does it remind you of home? Is there music now that is meaningful or relevant to your immigration experience? Why is it meaningful? |
| Music and Self-Understanding | One of the main interests in this research is exploring connections between music and people's understanding of who they are. Does music connect to your sense of who you are? What else can you tell me about this that we haven't talked about? |

Positionality

This research began as the first author's graduate work. The focus on ACB-identified immigrant youth was informed by the first author's lived experience as a young adult Black-identified immigrant of Caribbean descent, by her experiences making and teaching music, and by a desire to investigate the possible ways in which music is woven into young immigrants' evolving narratives. The second and third authors are White settler scholars with research foci in identity development, immigration, critical scholarship, and decolonizing and Indigenist research methodologies. They were the advisor (second author) and committee member for the first author's project. While data were collected for a master's thesis (Myrie, 2017), we returned to these data and engaged in subsequent analyses following completion of the initial project.

Method

All procedures were approved by our institutional research ethics board (REB).

Participants

We recruited eleven ACB-identified emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 29 ($M = 23$) from a university in a mid-sized Southern Ontario city and community organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. We focused recruitment efforts on organizations that worked with ACB young adults, including Black, Caribbean, and African student organizations, music schools, and community-based settlement organizations.

Nine participants identified as female and 2 as male. Seven self-identified as Permanent Residents, 3 as Temporary Residents and 1 as a Refugee. Countries of origin included Nigeria (4), Jamaica (3), Trinidad & Tobago (2), Lesotho (1), and St. Kitts and Nevis (1). The ages at which participants immigrated to Canada ranged from age 4 to age 26. In terms of levels of education, 5 participants had some college or university, 4 had obtained a Bachelor's degree, and 2 had completed a Master's degree.

Procedure

Participants were given a gift card for \$25.00 as an honorarium and travel expenses were covered. Interviews were conducted in locations that were convenient for participants and provided sufficient privacy, including university campuses, public libraries, and private rooms in community organizations. One interview was conducted in the participant's home. Participants completed a short demographic survey prior to the interview, which elicited information about age, self-identified gender, ethnicity, country of origin, immigration status, education, and employment status.

The semi-structured interview was adapted from McAdams' (2008) Life Story Interview protocol, which was adapted to focus on music practices and memories during key experiences and life stages. Interview prompts included questions that explored music use and meaning in life scenes. The guiding questions and prompts used in the interview are provided in Table 1.

Interview length ranged from 31 min to 130 min ($M = 87$ mins). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed

verbatim. Analyses were conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased approach to thematic analyses. In the first phase, the lead researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading through each transcript and taking handwritten notes and memos on areas of interest and initial patterns observed. She also made memos of her thoughts and feelings while engaging with the data. The second phase of data analyses involved generating initial codes. The first author read through each transcript individually and used Nvivo to highlight small segments of data that represented an idea or moment. This process of generating codes was inductive—driven by the data. The third phase of analysis built on the second phase by broadening the analysis and searching for overarching themes across the data set. The second author reviewed the transcripts and the first and second authors met several times to discuss the codes and began to organize these into categories, themes, and subthemes. The next stage involved all three authors in reviewing and refining themes, and we engaged in several cycles of refinement. This was a particularly rich data set and every time we returned to the transcripts, we tweaked our themes. Our analyses changed in relation to our ongoing research and relationships with anti-racist activist and scholarly movements. While we followed the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), we do not make claims about the validity of this research beyond our sample and our own interpretations. Our work is informed by post-qualitative notions that emphasize meaning-making as interpretive acts (e.g., Wiley & Wise, 2019) and the continuous, emergent nature of our own relationships with knowledge (Wilson, Breen & DuPré, in press). What we refer to here as “themes” should not be taken as statements of “truths”, but our interpretations derived in the context of our temporally, geographically, and socially situated knowledge.

Results and Discussion

We begin the results by reporting on participants' experiences of “being Black” in a Canadian context. We then describe what we learned from participants about the ways in which Black experiences in Canada are shaped by music, particularly in relation to dominant understandings of “Black music.” We use quotation marks in referring to “Black music” to signify that “Black music” is not homogenous and, as some of the excerpts in the following section suggest, participants resist dominant narratives regarding the kind of music that is positioned as “Black music.” Next, we describe our findings in relation to the role of music in the development of self and identity. We then move beyond hegemonic narratives of Canadian Black identity to consider music and complex personal identities, including those that actively resist dominant narratives of racialized bodies. We follow this with a focus on spiritual experiences of self and music for connection to land and ancestors. In these latter sections of the Results, we report participants' descriptions of Black music (quotation marks intentionally omitted) that is rooted in embodied Black identities. We have organized the results section to provide some discussion alongside our

reporting of themes and we expand on the discussion in our conclusions. We note that the topic of the interviews—music and identity—made these interviews rather different from other narrative interviews we have conducted. Participants often sang, played music clips, and moved their bodies as they described their life story in music. While we report our findings in the traditional form of a journal manuscript, it is important to note that the topic of music and identity—and perhaps also the shared life histories and interests of the lead researcher and the participants—created an interview context that highlights and perhaps also challenges the culture of traditional “Western” (i.e., White, European) approaches to social science interviews.

For each participant excerpt, we include the participant's age, self-identified gender, and the number of years they have lived in Canada (YC).

“(Re)Becoming Black” in Canada

Participants described immigration experiences as significant contexts for identity development. Transitioning to life in Canada necessitated learning new meanings of being and “becoming” Black. The following excerpts highlight some of the participants' experiences of learning about their identity as an ACB-identified person in the Canadian context:

Coming to Canada is when I first viewed myself as Black, like I'm never like Black you know. I was just, I mean I was dark skinned 'cause we had like dark skinned, light skinned, you know. So I was dark skinned, but like it wasn't like a big deal . . . and I got here and I was like Black. (Participant 5, Female, 19, 6 YC)

In this country I'm not White so obviously the opposite. I'm the polarized antonym. That's how they're very binary. So yeah I'm Black. (Participant 8, Male, 28, 2 YC)

But yeah coming from like Nigeria to here it's just like everyone there is Black . . . it is kind of like a weird shift to come into where you're like Black. You're not just yourself (laughing) right. (Participant 6, Female, 23, 14 YC)

Participants also spoke of the diversity of Black identities and experiences being collapsed into a single Black identity:

When I came to like, [suburb of Toronto], so it's pretty like diverse, and uhm, I just thought like okay, just everybody was White and then there was Black people. But then I started to like listen to people. And like Jamaicans would speak like Patois and I didn't quite know what that was, and I was like hmm, this is different. And it was like, all these like different things. And I was like, okay, so like, I guess, like we're all Black but we come from like different places. (Participant 5, Female, 19, 6 YC)

Participant 5 further describes learning that Black is an identity category that is imbued with particular meanings in the Canadian context:

On the TV, like on the news if they were describing someone that did something, they'd be like Black, like Black male, Black

female. Black was just like okay, so I guess I am Black. 'Cause it was an important component when they described a person.

She continues:

I guess [I had to] come to accept the identity of being Black, because that is what people see when they look at me. And I like, and also like, I am treated you know, like there is a certain way people treat me based on my skin colour. (Participant 5, Female, 19, 6 YC)

This participant describes learning about the identity that is ascribed to her in the Canadian context. Being Black in Canada is related to a master narrative of Black identity, which conveys meaning and structures social interaction in relation to White supremacy (e.g., Maynard, 2017). Indeed, the master narrative is one that is defined by others in society and participants expressed recognition that their complexed and nuanced personal identities are constrained within this monolithic narrative. Participant 9 (Female, 29, 16 YC) describes this as follows:

I am a Black woman but to myself am I a visible minority? No, I'm me. I'm not a minority in any way. I am visible, 'cause everyone is, but I'm not a minority. But I do realize that I have to also, my definitions do not rule the world (laughs). There are other people's definitions who trump mine.

She continues:

There is no stereotypical Black. Black is your colour its melanin . . . bone structure might be another, muscle composition might be another thing. But it doesn't make you who you are, but because of the way society is set up—like every difference is characteristic and you can't choose not to be Black. So like people know you are Black when they see you.

As suggested in the excerpts highlighted above, participants describe significant external pressure to (re)develop their identities in light of racist dominant master narratives of Blackness. It is an identity that fails to account for the diversity of Black identities, is determined by others, and appears to be forced on participants.

Dominant Understandings of "Black Music"

Participants described music as an important symbol and signifier of Black identity in Canada. Interactions with music provided information about what Black identity is supposed to look like in a Canadian context. For example, Participant 6 discussed learning about "Black music" as follows: "When I came to Canada I got into the culture of like Black music because in Nigeria there isn't like Black music. Everyone is Black" (Female, 23, 14 YC). Another participant articulated feeling confused about her identity as a Black person in light of the identity symbols, including clothes and music, available to her in her new culture:

Like the Black kids were with Black kids and other kids with the other kids and they would like be together, and there was a certain culture that went along with that too. Like I realized like the music or the way they spoke. The way they walked, what they wore, like the way they did their makeup, the hair . . . [. . .] so [. . .] I was just like oh okay so like I guess this is like a Black person . . . but like Black people, I didn't fit in with them. They didn't want me and have me. So I was like, but I'm Black though. Is this not, isn't it? (Participant 5, Female, 19, 6 YC)

Other participants shared the perception that they did not fit with the limited Black identity reflected in their new cultural context and, particularly, in "Black music." One participant found that being Black meant that she was not "allowed" to like Taylor Swift:

When I really started exploding into music and just like realizing that like, I don't have to listen to dancehall all the time because my friends do . . . I can still like, Taylor Swift and not care if you don't think I'm cool cause I like Taylor Swift, but, cause growing up in like the environment where like, the predominant thing is dancehall, and like liking a White girl, with White music, is like social suicide. (Participant 2, Female, 20, 1 YC)

Similarly, Participant 9 (Female, 29, 16 YC), outlined the tensions she experienced when her music choices did not align with what society deemed "Black music."

One of my best friends, she's like my sister, and I remember hanging out with her a lot as a kid, well as a kid, 17, 18 – wow, I feel old (laughs)—uhm, and a lot of her friends who didn't know me, like they didn't know me personally, like they knew, they knew me like as like. A friend of [name] or whatever, It was just like, ya, you're trying to be White. I'm like why? 'Cause of the shit you listen to. I'm just like, but that doesn't make me White . . . I was born in Africa, I'm Blacker than you, if you wanna go back (laughs). If you wanna go far back, I'm Blacker than you. So, and I guess that's something I've always struggled with. And also the older I've got the less I care.

Overall, these excerpts powerfully convey that the master narrative of Black identity is constrained in a Canadian context; and that this social identity is marked by specific outward expressions, including choices in music. Moreover, there are real social risks to venturing outside prescribed Black identity. We note that these excerpts also highlight resistance; participants emphasize that, while they are aware of the prescriptions for Black identity and "Black music," they willingly transgress these. We return to this theme of resistance a little further below.

Self and Identity Processes in Music

Many participants described music as directly linked to their understanding of themselves. Participant 4 states: "I connect to music knowing who I am, or where I'm going" (Female, 22, 7 YC). Some participants described purposefully engaging with music to gain new insights into themselves:

I am like constantly searching for things that fit, either fit what I want or force me to explore something that I'm trying not to explore. And music does that a lot for me. Like it kind of puts me in a state of mind, where it's like, ok you can't run away from yourself at this point. Figure it out, or do something with whatever you're thinking or feeling or whatever, and move on (laughs). Like it's, it's a catalyst for, in a way, actually in a lot of ways... (Participant 9, Female, 29, 16 YC)

While social prescriptions around musical choices were experienced as constraining and at times damaging, participants also found that music connected to deep and authentic experiences of self. For example, Participant 3 describes music as providing access to and expression of different facets of herself:

I feel like a whole lot of different sides to me. I don't feel like I should choose one and that's how I, that's how I am with my music, Like, there are a lot of different aspects of me that I like to you know, highlight some days, highlight some moments. And that's how I feel like with the music I listen to... different type of things I listen to, in some way tell you about me like what I like, or the type of, or like the perspectives I have of certain things. (Female, 20, 7 YC)

In this excerpt, the participant emphasizes that music represents different facets of who she is. Music enables her to play up or play down different parts of the self in different contexts and at different times. As this participant says a little later in the interview, "I as one person can just take all that different type of music in. Because I am also dynamic, right?" (Participant 3, Female, 20, 7 YC). Participant 9 also suggests that music functions to express different parts of herself, but in her case, it also functions to bring together or "meld" different aspects of herself:

The music I listen to now is a perfect definition of, like it's a perfect meld of who I am. Like I... feel like I could listen to this music for the rest of my life. Like that kind of thing. I don't see myself veering too far away from it... and all of it has to do with being comfortable being who I am. (Female, 29, 16 YC)

For this participant, music melds and helps to define who she is. This idea is also suggested in the following excerpt from the interview with Participant 3:

... when I found out about Moombahton—which is like the mix of house music with reggaeton like the Spanish type reggae—with dancehall type thing. And I felt the same way. I'm like "oh my gosh, I know about reggaeton, and I also already know about house music! This is crazy!" So ya... I like it, 'cause I mean, if they can exist as one, why can I not too (chuckles). Ya, 'cause I mean, now I just have both things to offer like, in both worlds. So ya, it's cool. Just make a new genre for myself... don't need to feel like I have no more home anywhere. Just make a new one. (Female, 20, 7 YC)

This excerpt provides insight into the function of music in bridging or melding multiple identities. Indeed, listening to and

compiling playlists composed of different artists, diverse music genres, and genre fusions enables listeners to listen to music that reflects their differing dimensions. Music can also orient to the future and provide new ways to create a coherent imagined self (Villa, 2014). As Participant 3 put it in the excerpt above, one can make "a new genre" for one's self.

In many ways, participants voiced that music was integral to their sense of self and identity. Participant 1 (Female, 23, 3 YC), referred to music as "like extension of myself at this point." She continues, "with songs, I trust it more than people sometimes so... like without it, I wouldn't be here. I know I'd be dead." Participant 3 shares a similar idea:

If I could never listen to music again I don't even know what I would be. To be honest, I have no idea what I would do, cause like, I'm an only child right and like, I don't, well depending of what music I'm listening to I will, I won't feel alone right? (sigh). It's like a constant for me as well. Well my mother's kind of a constant but I mean obviously she's at work or she's not there physically. But music's always there. And I have the power to make it whatever I want it to be. (Female, 20, 7 YC)

The relationship between self-identity and music is further suggested in this excerpt from the interview with Participant 8:

I'm now writing my own song (right) and I am discovering myself and learning myself and something's being written. You know it's being played. The brass [brass representing Black identity] is there, As I live and continue to grow and discover who I am I am creating my own music. I am the lyrics to my own song and I think I'm creating my own Soca tune or Calypso tune as I discover myself. (Participant 8, Male, 28, 2 YC)

These excerpts suggest that music is used in multiple ways in the development of self and identity. Indeed, there appears to be a bidirectional relationship between music and identity; identity informs musical choices and music facilitates the development of identity. In this way, music is relevant to both identity "contents" (what constitutes identity) and identity "processes" (how identity is developed) (Galliher et al., 2017).

Embodied Identity and Resistance Through Music

Throughout their interviews, participants discussed self and identity with a strong emphasis on an embodied identity. Participants spoke about music connecting deeply to physical experiences of movement and emotion. Music led participants to embrace their racialized bodies—affirming physical characteristics rejected in society, thereby resisting racist dominant master narratives about Black bodies. This resistance was rooted in different aspects of music, including lyrics, sounds, entire musical genres, and in the examples of musical artists. In the following excerpt, Participant 8 finds positive meanings of Blackness in the genres of soca and calypso:

Once I began to appreciate my Blackness and again appreciating more of my heritage—which is my music—because in order to

appreciate soca and I appreciate calypso I have to appreciate my Blackness because my Blackness is in those things. . . . And that is what music is doing. I am good enough. This genre is good enough to listen to, dance to and appreciate and share with someone else. Hence I can share another part of myself and not hide it. (Participant 8, Male, 28, 2 YC)

This excerpt suggests that appreciating the music of his heritage—soca and calypso—is connected to appreciating his own Blackness. Later in the interview, Participant 8 returns to this idea: “What music has done for me now it has created that path to finding my Blackness, finding my rhythm.”

Participants emphasized that some musical genres are rooted in culture and reflective of collective lived experience. For example, Participant 8 (Male, 28, 2 YC), states “listening to soca reminds me of who I am. It reminds me of my identity. It also keeps me updated on the new things that are happening back home.” Participant 11 (Female, 22, 14 YC) echoes this by highlighting that she listens to music from home because “you just wanna still be a part of a culture . . . and still feel like you’re Jamaican even though you’re in a Canadian society.”

Participants also emphasized that music reflects collective lived experience in relation to the challenges they face in Canada with respect to anti-Black racism and White supremacy. They emphasize the importance of music artists as they navigate these challenges. Consider the following excerpts:

My ethnicity the artists are speaking about issues and like, just social interactions that I can relate with. Right, and so, obviously anything to do with like racism” (Participant 7, Male, 24, 7 YC).

“Tupac’s kinda a requirement for being Black . . . I don’t necessarily know a lot about his like struggles growing up, where he grew up, but like a lot of the struggles he talks about being Black and those kind of things I can identify with more as I’ve gotten older. (Participant 1, Female, 23, 3 YC)

When discussing Reggae music and artists such as Bob Marley, Participant 11 states that they are:

Talking about the struggle, I guess moving from a different country here—and dealing with like the racism or stuff like that—[the music] kinda makes me feel empowered. (Female, 22, 14 YC)

Music enables participants to counter and resist dominant narratives of Black bodies. Participant 8 highlights that “even though you might be shunned physically, music allows you this freeness . . . to appreciate my Blackness” (Male, 28, 2 YC). From this viewpoint, representation in Black music—and, specifically, Black artists—can affirm positive conceptions of being Black. Participant 10 describes the influence of Chaka Khan:

The afro, for me, is like a sense of, it’s a symbol. It’s a symbol, of empowerment, of, for that demographic, for where I am, my social location cause [. . .] at that time, it was all about having the straight hair, you had to have a perm, if you didn’t have a perm, or naturally like curly, mixed girl, the good hair, uhm, you weren’t as desirable.

But to see somebody who had, [. . .] she has this natural—I mean it was probably a weave, but it looked natural you know, hair . . . it was like, okay there’s nothing wrong with my little kinky hair—I stopped asking my mom for perms, and ya, it helped me have confidence in myself. (Female, 23, 19 YC)

For some participants, there seems to be an ongoing process of healing through music, and through identification with Black artists. As suggested in the following excerpts, music is intentionally chosen in order to receive, affirm, and promote messages that counter dominant messages within society:

Like there are certain features that I try to hide. But now I don’t care. This is beautiful. Being Black is beautiful. I should not hide these things and I’ve come to that and music helps me appreciate that self as well. So yes, music has been a healing process. (Participant 8, Male, 28, 2 YC)

I’m listening to women that are specifically saying the opposite and trying to uplift everyone, so like India.Arie songs. Like, I probably might hear, . . . brother, where it’s just like, actually like reaching out to her dark skin brothers and like, you know, I love you even though you may feel like, oh you’re not desirable or anything like that. (Participant 3, Female, 20, 7 YC)

Some participants spoke of music empowering them to engage in other forms of resistance and collective action. Participant 5 states:

He [Artist 2Face Idibia who currently goes by 2Baba] also like talked about stuff that I felt like people were scared to talk about like, just how corrupt the government was and how they weren’t treating us properly . . . That’s why I really liked that album. It was special to me. And it was like my little like, you know like, we can make change or like, you know something can be done. And you can like be a part of that change. That’s stuck with me all my life, cause that’s like my motto—like always like, you can always do something, you just have to like have that fire. And that album like lit a fire. (Female, 19, 6 YC)

A similar idea is expressed by Participant 3:

I keep forgetting what the song is called, but James Brown he says . . . I don’t want nobody to give me nothing just open up the door. I’ll get in myself (laughs), type of thing. . . . It’s not really that message. It’s not really talking to me; it’s more talking to, you know, but it’s kind of like, we shouldn’t feel helpless either right? I mean we’re more than capable of doing anything right? So also the idea of like mental slavery right. So, some things you can’t help physic—by yourself, but if you mobilize anything is possible. But just don’t take the closed door in front of you right now as the final answer. (Female, 20, 7 YC)

These excerpts demonstrate that the relationship between music and resistance can be two-fold. Music choices—including genre, lyrics, sounds, and music artists—can nurture resistance to a master narrative of Blackness and can also inspire

and empower participants to activism rooted in collective resistance.

Spiritual Connections

The following excerpts suggest that music can connect individuals to their ancestors, evoking emotional and spiritual memories and a sense of responsibility to broader relationships. Participants spoke of music as transcending the physical and temporal aspects of identity. Some also referenced spiritual identities rooted in faith-based and cultural traditions. Participant 10 described the song “Blessings of Abraham” as particularly meaningful to her:

‘cause of course you are the, the seed, so from since, even before I was physically born, uhm, I was promised you know, and it’s like identity, my true identity. Not just ya, I’m a Black chick, living in Canada. You know it’s beyond that. And I feel like a notion like that is timeless, cause it will never change, unless I decide that it changes. (Female, 23, 19 YC)

Participant 10 describes identity as rooted in spiritual connection—an identity in existence even before birth. Participant 3 (Female, 20, 7 YC) further links music and spirituality by referring to music as “this sort of way to transcend our now, ‘cause people use it in spiritual rituals right? Because it’s a way to feel like you’re creating something to send up right?”

Many participants spoke of identities anchored in socio-historical narratives of enslavement, forced displacement, and intergenerational trauma. This was the case for Participant 10, whose narrative highlights the absences and silences that exist in place of identity stories:

Even just like me saying I’m from Africa, but I have no idea where that says a lot. A lot of people can, I can’t go on ancestry.com and figure it out. I don’t have that privilege that other people do, so, my people are a struggling people. (Participant 10, Female, 23, 19 YC)

Missing origin stories can challenge identity coherence. However, participants highlighted that music can be a tool for exploring and articulating fractured identities. One of the hallmarks of narrative identity is providing a sense of coherence across time—integrating the past, present, and imagined future (Bamberg, 2011; McAdams & McLean, 2013). The following excerpt evidences the use of music to provide connection across time to ancestors, present racialized identities, and future selves:

I deal with a lot of identity issues when it comes to this stuff, cause it’s like, obviously we know we have West African background but like where? We don’t know, so like that’s far . . . Jamaica’s as far back as you can go. I listen to this Afro-Cuban sister group, they’re twins and they’re called Ibeyi, and like, when I listen to them, it’s not like they’re telling me things specifically, but when I hear them speak, like doing Yoruba chants or stuff like that, it just reminds me of my ancestors and how I feel like, I have some type of, responsibility or like obligation to do something worthwhile, once,

I have this opportunity that was not granted to them, or given to them. They fought for it. Right? (Participant 3, Female, 20, 7 YC)

She continues:

For Ibeyi, they do this like, this chant that’s in Yoruba and I have no idea what they’re saying. I’ve looked up the lyrics once . . . but like when I listen to it I don’t remember the lyrics, but just hearing them speaking, I just, I just feel like, like my ancestors telling me everything I need to know. Just be like, confident and have strength to deal with some like, things that I have to deal with around me that try to attack my confidence in what I am and what I look like type of thing . . . When I hear them, I feel like you know, like they’re behind you, you know, everything’s gonna work out. Just keep doing you. (Participant 3, Female, 20, 7 YC)

Participant 8 shares similar sentiments: “So Creole is part of my background. I identify and I don’t know what they’re saying and but I know that is part of me. You see?” (Male, 28, 2 YC). Participant 8 underscores the ability of music to connect him to places and parts of himself not otherwise accessible.

I know Spanish. So when I hear Latino music I dance. And even though it’s in that genre there is a part of it, there is, there’s Blackness to it as well. . . . so I have found myself—partly because of music. I’ve travelled because of that.

He continues:

Especially the fact that when we look at the history of Latin America understanding that there was slaves there too and the shit didn’t just, this didn’t come from Spain honey. Just like Soca and knowing that post colonialism . . . The blending of two cultures together creating and it’s not just one version of Latin music. . . . Again there’s Blackness to each of these genres. Because this shit didn’t come from the White man. It came from somebody who was mixed. And that has been identified but yes, those people did not negate . . . there was no negating their Blackness. (Participant 8, Male 28, 2 YC)

For many, music is a tool for “self-love” and embracing their roots:

Those self-love ones, like I find that’s very important. That’s why I’m listening to it . . . But then also the Ibeyi type ones and the Afro-Cuban type ones. . . . I acknowledge that, my ancestors are very much a part of the type of life I am able to live—and me. And I don’t want to neglect that. Even though a lot of outside sources tryna make me feel like I should. So that’s me putting the effort to acknowledge them and feel like I’m a little bit closer to them. Cause their resilience, determination, every, like everything. (Participant 3, Female, 20, 7 YC)

Music-facilitated connections to ancestors are described as an important source of strength. This may be particularly important for individuals with a history that they cannot access in the mainstream culture, whether a result of enslavement, colonialism, migration, or a combination. Ancestral connections are a

way to cope with identity struggles and questions; they also can work to inform future actions. Participant 3 emphasized that music provides a sense of responsibility to do something with her future so she does not disappoint her ancestors. Indeed, music can anchor racialized identities across time, create continuity amid change and coherence across context, and inform how one navigates the world. For ACB-identified emerging adults, the ability to access music that reflects one's heritage may be especially important for the development of identity. This approach to identity which draws land and ancestors together across time challenges Western notions of selfhood, which tend to not to consider selves in relation to ancestors, land, spirituality, collective functioning, and other important aspects of Afrocentric and Indigenous cosmology (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Graham, 1999; Reviere, 2001; Wilson et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Participants' narratives illuminate dominant narratives of Blackness in Canadian society, while also revealing participants' narrative and embodied acts of individual and collective resistance. Consistent with previous literature on music and identity (Frith, 1996; MacDonald et al., 2002), participants used music to articulate and explore social and personal identity. From a narrative perspective, music can be seen to communicate master narratives. When individuals do not fit or accept master narratives, they often experience a loss of connection and a loss of power (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2019). Indeed, the term "Master" highlights the way in which these narratives function to dominate, constrain, and control (Bishop, 2002). For participants in our sample, music provided a tool to resist dominant master narratives of Blackness in Canada despite the risks (i.e., social suicide) (McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers & Way, 2016).

Among narrative forms, music is unique in its deep connections to sensory experiences and embodiment (Villa, 2014). Music connects people to "who they are" in their bodies and, moreover, it can enable self-acceptance of embodied identities. Participants spoke of their "Blackness" in a positive light and described using music to celebrate it. Participants raise important considerations regarding identity coherence. Our findings highlight that coherence can be difficult for those who have experienced displacement from homelands and lost stories of origin as a result of the colonial project (see also Vila, 2014). Our exploration of music provided a means to highlight a process by which participants establish self-continuity and coherence—by using music to create connections to histories and selves that had been severed by legacies of enslavement and forced migration. Music was used by some participants as a tool for connecting with generational stories, ancestors, and/or spiritual memories and beliefs. These findings demonstrate that music can illuminate the intersections of time and context, and aid in providing self-continuity (Bamberg, 2011; Barrett, 2011; Clary-Lemon, 2010; Ngo, 2008). This

highlights the possible roles of music in establishing self-continuity and as a tool for healing.

These connections may be especially important for young people who are actively developing a sense of identity. For many participants, migration occurred during adolescence and emerging adulthood—the periods in the life span when identity work is intensified (e.g., Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; McLean & Breen, 2016). Research on narrative identity suggests that late childhood and early adolescence are a time when many young people become aware of the cultural concept of biography (Habermas, 2007)—they recognize the kind of life that is expected of them within a particular cultural context. The participants who shared their stories with us recognized particular master narratives that assign meanings and expectations around Black identities in Canada. As ACB-identified immigrants to Canada, the participants may be able to see aspects of Canadian culture that are invisible to those who have been raised in Canadian culture and whose identities are not marginalized. As noted by McLean and colleagues (McLean et al., 2018), "if we want to define the culture, asking those who do not fit in can start to tell us what the culture actually looks like" (p. 645). The young, ACB-identified immigrants who shared their stories articulated the ways in which they did not "fit" and suggested that the artists, lyrics, and sounds of music provided tools to find belonging, establish identity, and resist hegemonic narratives rooted in anti-Black racism and White supremacy. Music is important throughout life, but it may be particularly salient for identity work in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and perhaps especially so for young people whose identities are marginalized.

There is a great deal of evidence for the benefits of music and expressive arts in individual and community development. The benefits of art-based and music interventions include building positive identity concepts, self-awareness and confidence, social relationships, and a sense of agency. The arts can also promote social inclusion, social justice, social change, and well-being for individuals and communities (e.g., Batt-Rawden & Andersen, 2020; Howell, 2011; Heinonen et al., 2018; Millar & Warwick, 2019; Sunderland et al., 2018). Adding to a growing body of literature (e.g., Anderson & Mack, 2019; Crawford et al., 2014; Hess, 2018; Kelly, 2017; Oba, 2016; Olson-Mcbride & Page, 2012; O'Mathúna, 2008; Palmer, 2003; Rice et al., 2018; Short, 2014; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Wever, 2009), this study suggests that music interventions with ACB youth and emerging adults may have the potential to align with Afrocentric ways of healing, engage ACB community strengths—providing avenues for connection that are familiar, enjoyable, and meaningful, and create spaces for important work in identity development and resistance.

There are several noteworthy limitations in this study; firstly, our sample size was small and self-selected through snowball sampling. Given the recruitment methodology, self-selection bias was unavoidable, and our study did not include people who were not interested in music. We also note that nine out of 11 participants identified as women and it is possible

that our findings would be different if more male-identifying and gender non-binary participants were included. The sample was also highly educated, with all participants reporting at least some college- or university- level education, and this may have influenced our findings in a number of ways. For example, level of education may impact identity processes (e.g., Verhoeven, et al. 2019), as well as engagement in critical thinking (e.g., Huber & Kuncel, 2016). We would also like to point out that the complexity of music—as an art form, a tool for self-expression, and a vehicle for the construction of identity—is a little unwieldy for a research focus. It can be hard to know what we are speaking about when we talk about music, as its constitutive elements—melodies, rhythm, and lyrics (which may be a form of narrative) may each influence people directly or in combinations. Moreover, music is often inextricably bound to the musician; at times when participants speak of the influence of music, they are in fact speaking of the influence of people and role models who make music. Teasing apart these complexities is beyond the scope of this research, but an important direction for future work on music and identity development.

Despite these limitations, our research highlights the importance of music in identity development and resistance, and this is an important area for continued research. This exploration of the intersections between music and identity produced rich data. Participants often sang, played music clips, and moved as they described their life story in music—bringing the first author into their world and demonstrating the personal meaning music holds in relation to their identity stories. Our method of incorporating music into life story narratives suggests a promising direction for methodological development. As researchers, we recognize that our theories and methods are rooted in (White) European and North American discursive traditions. The richness of the data produced in this study and the (unexpected) incorporation of singing and movement in the interviews inspires us to ask, how might our research processes and methods be made more relevant to and reflective of diverse communities (see also Syed & Kathawalla, in press; Wilson et al., in press)? Participants' resistance to whiteness seems, in our view, to have extended to resistance to whiteness in traditional approaches to interview-based data collection. We are deeply grateful to them for providing us with new insights and questions regarding the cultural context(s) of our lives and work.



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Open Practices

The raw data used in this qualitative study are not openly available due to privacy restrictions set by our Research Ethics Board. Because data are qualitative, there is no analysis code/syntax used and/or available for download. The interview questions used in this study are provided in Table 1. We utilized Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and no coding manual was created. There are no additional materials available for download and this study did not include a pre-registration plan for data collection and/or analysis. Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

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