Youth, Reverberations, and Detroit's Most Charismatic Rapper

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Abstract

"Type in Sada Baby on the computer and let them hear the difference." Devante gives me this advice in the midst of an escalating back-and-forth among his peers about the difference between singing and rapping. Eighteen middle schoolers lounge around two picnic tables inside our local community center for this six-week summer program.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Civic Engagement, Hip Hop, Listening



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"Type in Sada Baby on the computer and let them hear the difference."

Devante gives me this advice in the midst of an escalating back-and-forth among his peers about the difference between singing and rapping. Eighteen middle schoolers lounge around two picnic tables inside our local community center for this six-week summer program. We're still in the first week, and each day they've name-checked Sada Baby, a charismatic rapper from the eastside of Detroit. I'm too occupied at the moment—trying to keep the conversation from spilling into an argument—to heed Devante's advice, so he takes matters into his own voice.

"Rapping is like this," he tells the group while starting to nod his head to an ear-magined beat. "Oh boy, I ain't playing no games!" Devante raps the first half-bar of "Oh Boy," Sada Baby's 2017 track that narrates his street exploits and threatens his rivals — often with violence to the women they might or might not love. Devante not only raps this opening line but approximates the grain of Sada Baby's voice, at least as much as he can since his adolescent tone hasn't yet caught up to his linebacker build. My own ear—from over 20 years as hip-hop DJ, turntablist, and vinyl enthusiast—is more Sadat X than Sada Baby. But Sada's playful allure is audible even to me, like while bending his cadence into indecipherable sounds over the track's intro. And he covered "Return of the Mack" into a shirtless gunplay revenge track. So there's that, too. I can understand the affective draw he has on the young people in the room. And even if couldn't, this wouldn't be the last I would hear of him in Yaktown Sounds that summer.

https://youtu.be/aaJFih-p4ZM

Yaktown Sounds is an emergent space of sound making I curate in and around Pontiac, Michigan. (Pon-ti-*Yak* = *Yak*town, get it?) A postindustrial city halfway between Detroit and Flint, Pontiac is the home of jazz drummer Elvin Jones, hip-hop group Binary Star, and perhaps the most respected battle rapper on the national scene today: JC. Since 2015, I've organized an evolving network of artists—usually DJs and beat makers—to make space for youth and community members to play with sound. Of course, play and sound go well together. In Yaktown Sounds, sometimes it's elementary-age youth at the public library hitting pads and twisting knobs on MIDI controllers until they like what they hear. Other times it's daddies and daughters scratching a record under the needle to see what comes out. The summer of 2017, I lined up a different musical artist each week from Pontiac and Detroit to visit and share their skills.

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Photo at Yaktown Sounds by James Easterly

My curatory approach to this space takes inspiration from Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), a creative, visionary, performative Black girlhood practice. In part, SOLHOT generates from a particular stance on Black girlhood sound. In *Hear Our Truths* (2013), SOLHOT visionary Ruth Nicole Brown theorizes Black girlhood sound and the ways it resists and improvises around neoliberal youth programming constraints that are intended to "fix" youth. Riffing off Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*, Brown theorizes Black girlhood as a *sound* nobody can organize. It bounces off adult listenings that would compress it into binary identity positions like sass/silence or into white mainstream notions of politeness and civility. What follows from this stance are not constrained, prescribed "learning environments" for youth but open, performative, imaginative spaces not always under adults' control. This is the type of environment I try to facilitate in Yaktown Sounds.

This stance toward space and environment means vulnerability to reverberations and their affects. Reverberation, of course, is a phenomenon and technique that plays a prominent role in Black diasporic sonic expression. As Michael E. Veal writes, its affect/effect is most pronounced through Jamaican dub music: the collisions among sounds through echo, delay, and reverb. Veal's engagement with dub and reverberation is also conceptual. In *Dub* (2013), he considers its echoes and ruptures "a sonic metaphor for the condition of diaspora" (197). In *Sound Curriculum* (2018), Walter Gershon thinks with sound to make a similar argument for reverberation and other physical, metaphysical, and aural phenomena: "Because sounds are already in motion, they are always reverberating, bouncing off of objects from sinus cavities to walls to coral to brush to air to water to stone" (56). In these instances, Veal and Gershon take up reverberation in both aural and environmental settings. Yet these ideas also apply to the spaces where youth

and adults co-create together. What collides, bounces, and stays in motion? What counts as a reverberation?

In **that summer of Yaktown Sounds, I understand Sada Baby's aural presence as a kind of reverberation. He stayed in motion, colliding with youth judgments about what counted as rap, how a rapper's voice should sound, and even my own aspirations for the space. These collisions were most apparent while preparing each week for our visiting artist.**



https://youtu.be/XznTS7jcOko

Before a visit from Mahogany Jones, we watched the video for her song "Blue Collar Logic." Landon was the first to respond while leaning back against the table, feet kicked out in front of him, and retwisting his short bronze locks:

> ***"Can we see another one? That one wasn't good. I didn't think it was good. Not as good as I thought it would be. It was too much of that, uh, old time. I just think she didn't rap enough."***

For Landon, the standard for rapping enough and not sounding "old time" was—you guessed it—Sada Baby. "He actually raps," Landon noted while explaining. If we consider music and song not only as art but as different organizations of sound (another point from Gershon), Landon has a point. To get specific, some of Sada Baby's songs are continuous bars of rapping — no hooks, no chorus, no rest. In "Oh Boy," Sada Baby raps for two minutes and 20 seconds of the song, and guest artist FMB DZ raps a 40 second verse. Straight bars over a trap beat. By comparison, "Blue Collar Logic" is also roughly 3-minutes long but has a fuller song structure. Mahogany Jones raps for 1 minute and 20 seconds across two verses. In the golden era template of DJ Premier, cuts from DJ Los make up the 30-second intro, the two choruses, and the instrumental outro that lasts approximately one minute. If we do the math, Sada Baby's track has more than double the rapping compared to Mahogany's.

My point here isn't to judge which organization of sound is better; there is no wrong way to organize sound. Rather, these details illustrate two very *different* organizations and how Sada Baby's made up the basis for Landon's judgment.

If Landon's directness that "she didn't rap enough" rings a bit harsh to our polite adult listenings, then hear Kareem slice through the group conversation after listening to hometown artist Kodac aka M80, who had just returned from a European tour:

> ***"He don't know how to rap."***

Kareem's judgment was based upon what he heard as singing and rapping happening in the same song, an organization of sound he classified as "old." When I asked Kareem what Kodac needed to do to be a better rapper — "in *your* opinion," the recommendation was equally direct: "Be more like Sada Baby."

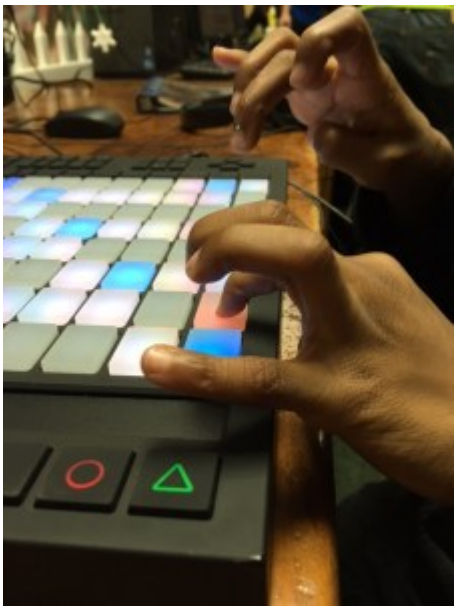


Photo at Yaktown Sounds by Emery Petchauer

These responses from Landon and Kareem show us something else about the movement of reverberations through this space. Sada Baby's aural presence not only collided with youth preferences and claims about rap. As a reverberation, he was used to *berate* other artists whose sounds and configurations of sound were heard as "old" through youths' generationally tuned ears.

Despite the youth-centric stance I take on spaces like Yaktown Sounds, I'm not gonna lie: the strikes and blows of these reverberations hit me too because of the relational ties I hold with these artists. They are part of my own creative community. I've DJed on stage for Kodac. I go to all of Mahogany's shows. As a result, I remain vulnerable to the force of these reverberations. Owning up to that point, I am reminded of what Shakira Holt teaches us about adults and how we listen, particularly in education settings: sometimes we are not as open-eared to youth as we imagine ourselves to be — especially given the ways we have been socialized to censor and silence Black youth, even ones who live through our own cities, schools, and community centers. Though I'm two years removed from this particular iteration of Yaktown Sounds, Sada Baby

continues to reverberate with/against me. He stays in motion even now, echoing through my writing as I toggle over to his Soundcloud page, press play on his songs, and wonder if I will hear something that makes me tune in differently to the young people around me.

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Featured image: Screenshot from "Sada Baby–On Gang"

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Emery Marc Petchauer makes beats and DJs with kids in and around Pontiac, MI. A former high school English teacher, he works as an associate professor of English and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. His scholarship has addressed the aesthetic practices of hip-hop culture and their connections to teaching, learning, and living. He also studies the high stakes test educators must pass to become certified teachers. He is online at empetch.com and on Twitter at @emerypetchauer.

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