Abstract
This paper explores how Indigenous Hip-Hop in Australia has become a powerful force for both advocating for Indigenous issues, and expressing contemporary Indigenous identity. We argue that Australian Indigenous Hip-Hop cannot merely be understood as either an adoption or reinterpretation of a Hip-Hop culture from the USA, nor as an attempt to hark back to traditional, pre-colonial Indigenous cultures. Rather, we argue it builds on a history of contemporary Indigenous protest music, by integrating both forms of expression and narratives of resistance and political consciousness inherent in Hip-Hop culture from the USA. Using Australian Indigenous Hip-Hop group, A.B. Original, as an example, we suggest recent manifestations of this integration have provided a way to both resist colonial narratives and celebrate contemporary Indigenous identity even in the current socio-political climate of far-right nationalism in Australia and other first-world nations.

Introduction
It's the blackout, yeah, brothers in the area
Smart black man with a plan, nothing scarier
Now blackout, yeah, they still wanna
Kick the blacks out, yeah, I get the feeling
That I'm dead even though I'm still here walking
All said and done I can still hear talking
Now blackout, yeah, they still wanna
Kick the blacks out, yeah, they still wanna kick the
(Briggs, Rankine, and Reugens 2016)

This paper presents how several contemporary Indigenous Hip-Hop artists in Australia are using their music as both a powerful political tool, and a way to connect with, and assert their own particular Indigenous identities in resistance to mainstream colonial Australian society. As literature reminds us, Hip-Hop is a culture that finds its origins in the experience of African-American and Latino communities living in the USA. In the last two decades, much of this literature has been dedicated to discussing the spread of the culture and art form around the globe, and debating the implications of its appropriation in different settings and by different communities, including Indigenous communities in Australia. This paper does not aim to enter fully into these complex and ongoing debates, but rather we draw attention to, and discuss the current state of Indigenous Hip-Hop in Australia. In doing this we discuss how Hip-Hop is being used to bring Indigenous issues into public discussion within a shifting political climate. We argue that Indigenous Australian Hip-Hop simultaneously privileges Indigenous knowledges and key political and social discourses inherent within a broader Hip-Hop culture, such as community, resistance, and social justice, at the same time that Hip-Hop artists working in this space are optimising both cultural/social traditions to get their messages across. To do this, we will focus on the work of Indigenous Hip-Hop artists, Briggs and Trials, and their collaborative project, A.B. Original, which has consistently made headlines for both musical and political reasons.

A (brief) history of Hip-Hop
Hip-Hop culture was born of the social, economic, and political struggles within Black and Latino communities of the South Bronx, New York, during the early 1970s (Rose 1994). Since its beginnings, many consider that it
has grown to become a cultural practice that expresses the ongoing struggles of these communities more widely throughout the US, while simultaneously offering a celebration of being of African (Keyes 1996) or Latino heritage (Flores 2004). Importantly, as an act of expression and celebrating identity, it is considered a cultural practice that provides a conscious and complex resistance to the oppressive systems that dominate the world within which these people live (Chang 2007).

While Hip-Hop is considered to have a distinct origin point, and represent completely new and unique musical genre\(^1\) (Salaam 1995), it is also considered one of the most recent manifestations of Afro-centric art forms generated out of the experience of the African diaspora living within the United States, and elsewhere around the globe (Potter 1995). Thus it is considered a descendent, or close relation to, the Blues, Jazz, Rock and Roll, Funk, and Soul all of which originated within the musical cultures of similar communities (Hara 2012). Furthermore, like Hip-Hop, each of these musical art forms has been adopted by diverse cultures and people widely around the globe. Yet, as a culture, Hip-Hop has proven unique both in reasons why it has been adopted around the world, and the extent to which this has taken place. Not only does it represent some of the most popular forms of artistic expression, it also provides a culture of social awareness (Forman and Neal 2004). Thus it has been adopted internationally by many ethnic and cultural groups in order to express themselves and their social realities through what Osumare (2001) terms a global network of ‘connective marginalities’.

**Hip-Hop and Indigenous Communities**

Indigenous communities around the world have been among the first and most notable groups to connect with and appropriate Hip-Hop. This includes Indigenous peoples from Africa, New Zealand (Mitchell 2000), North America, Canada (Proulx 2010), Mexico (Osumare 2001), Greenland (Clarke and Hiscock 2009). Other minority peoples and or marginalised populations from Europe and Asia and have also adopted Hip-Hop as a means to express disaffection with the colonial project (Mitchell 2000). It has been said these communities not only identify with the broader messages of Hip-Hop which originated in the USA that link experiences of segregation with the celebration of marginalised identities, but that Hip-Hop also provides a way to express their identity in a contemporary or “cosmopolitan” worlds (Proulx 2010).

These processes of identification with and adoption of USA Hip-Hop culture has been described at length in relation to Indigenous communities in Australia (Mitchell 2002, 2006a, b, Morgan and Warren 2011, Pennycook 2007, Minestrelli 2016). Along with minority groups from immigrant communities, young Indigenous Australians in urban centres are said to be some of the first to have engaged seriously with, and actively participated in Hip-Hop culture (Mitchell 2006a). This led to the formation of several Hip-Hop groups and solo artists, comprising both young men and women such as The Last Kinection, Local Knowledge, Munkimuk, and Radical Son, that were either wholly Indigenous, or included strong representation from Indigenous communities.

As the above works indicate, studies of Indigenous Hip-Hop are proportionately well represented within Australian-based literature. Yet, what has been missing from this academic commentary is an Indigenous Australian perspective. Importantly, this includes exploration of the purpose and intent of Indigenous Hip-Hop to express contemporary Indigenous points of view within an environment of on-going racism and social oppression in urban Australia. Instead, current literature presents an academic perspective on Indigenous musical expression via Hip-Hop, rather than an understanding of the Indigenous experience from an Indigenous point of view using Hip-Hop as a musical medium. This paper aims to begin addressing this by including an Indigenous perspective to add depth to the current Australian literature\(^2\).

**Indigenous Histories and Contemporary Australia:**

Today, Indigenous Australians are represented by several hundred diverse social groupings, each with their own languages and cultural traditions. Despite this diversity, collectively they are said to embody the oldest continuous culture in the world (Dockery 2010). Part of this collective culture includes particular ways of

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\(^1\) While this paper refers predominantly to Hip-Hop music (or Rap), it must be acknowledged that Hip-Hop culture is comprised of at least four elements, including MCing (rapping), DJing (using turntables as instruments), Graffiti, and Breakdancing (Chang 2007).

\(^2\) The first author of this paper is a member of the Central Arrernte peoples of Central Australia. The second author is of Anglo-European descent.
understanding the world, and aligns Indigenous Australians with Indigenous peoples worldwide through Indigenous Knowledges theory. While often recognised as a complex and often problematic concept as it is represented or operationalised by dominant or Western societies (Nakata 2002), this theory is explicitly founded in the Indigenous experience of being colonised and oppressed peoples, but who despite this, maintain distinct worldviews and cultural understandings of social and cultural realities (Battiste 2013, 2016, Martin 2016, Smith 1999).

In parallel with the experiences of many Indigenous societies around the globe, colonisation in Australia brought with it significant atrocities for Indigenous peoples. Land was taken, diseases introduced, and communities displaced. Yet, what has set the experience of Indigenous Australians apart from most other Indigenous peoples is that Australia was legally declared Terra Nullius, or ‘land belonging to no-one’. Until overturned with the decision in Mabo v. Queensland No. 2 in 1992, this legal fiction ensured that Indigenous Australians had no land rights or legal status as sovereign citizens, leading to a plethora of legislation and government policies controlling every aspect of Indigenous peoples’ lives in this country. This included legislation in every Australian state and territory which allowed for the removal of Aboriginal children from their families in what has become known as the Stolen Generations (Read 2006).

Another significant element characterising the Australian Indigenous experience is what Curthoys (1999) has called the “angry rejection” from non-Indigenous citizens that contemporary Australian is built on a legacy of racism and colonisation. Interestingly, this is despite the legal reality of Terra Nullius existing up to as recently as 1992 (Mercer 1993). Curthoys relates this both to a selective writing of Austrian Settler history which ignored issues of race (2006), and the tendency within mainstream Australia to see the country as being built on notions of tolerance, diversity and mateship, and the ill-treatment of Indigenous Australians as being in the past and no longer relevant to the national narrative (Curthoys 1999). Indeed, this was supported by political leaders throughout the 1990s and early to mid 2000s (Barta 2008).

It was not until 2008 that then prime minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised to Australian Indigenous peoples for the government policies which led to children being removed from their families (Barta 2008) – policies which meant whole communities were displaced from their traditional home lands and relocated on government and church missions under the guise of welfare protection (Read 2006). Despite a strong counter argument within some mainstream media and academic circles questioning the veracity of the Stolen Generations (see debates, Manne 2003, Windschuttle 2002, Grieves 2003) and whether the Rudd apology can therefore be seen as a turning point in relationships between Indigenous peoples and mainstream Australia, significant gaps continue in areas of education, health, employment and incarceration. In fact, Australia continues to have the highest incarceration rates of Indigenous youth in the world (White 2015, Georgatos 2016).

Further, the current political climate in Australia appears to have regressed from one of notional recognition and cultural diversity to one characterised by conservative nationalism, and even open hostility towards cultural minorities. Most notably, this includes the successful re-emergence of the right-wing political party One Nation, which some call a veiled return to the ‘White-Australia policy’ (Johns 2017): essentially immigration policies developed upon the Federation of Australia in 1901 under the Immigration Restriction Act (1901), which regulated immigrants through the introduction of a dictation test. This was designed to limit the entry of non-British and non-English people into the country, such as Chinese workers. Despite ongoing claims from many politicians that Australia is an open, cosmopolitan, multicultural society, in the contemporary political climate, even mainstream political parties have taken a conservative turn towards stronger restriction on immigration and other policies targeting certain ethnic groups (Hussein and Poynting 2017).

As Hogan and Haltinner (2015) suggest, this is part of a wider resurgence of right-wing populism in the United Kingdom, the USA and Australia, which more recently can be tied to the success of the success of the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump to the White House. In Australia, this has been actualised through appropriating Australia Day celebrations and the Australian flag as symbols of exclusionary nationalism (Fozdar, Spittles, and Hartley 2015). A number of associated social movements such “Reclaim Australia”, have emerged with the goals of safeguarding mainstream Australian values against the perceived threat of migrant communities (Hussein and Poynting 2017). Together, these factors illustrate a far-right element in Australia that has not only found strength in recent global debates surrounding national security and a return to
Indigenous Protest Music

Within this conservative political and social climate, however, Indigenous Hip-Hop in Australia has come to flourish, bringing with it not only increased exposure and commercial success, but strong socio-political messages. Yet, it is important to note that this wave of Australian Indigenous Hip-Hop has not sprung from nowhere. Nor can it be understood merely as a mirroring of the experiences of disaffected African American and Latino peoples. As referenced earlier in this article, there is a history of Indigenous Hip-Hop in Australia which has found solidarity with discourses of oppression and resistance of African American and Latino Hip-Hop artists. Yet the musical roots of today’s Indigenous Hip-Hop artists can be seen as linked to a history of socio-political music activism within the Australian indigenous community that pre-dates Hip Hop.

There is a notable history of protest music from Indigenous musicians (Sweeney 1991, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004). Artists including No Fixed Address, the Warumpi Band, and Archie Roach have for decades used contemporary musical styles like rock and reggae to express socio-political issues faced by Indigenous communities, providing a voice for Indigenous peoples throughout Australia (Gibson 1998). The rise of these bands coincided with significant Indigenous protest movements in Australia, including calls for Land Rights and the subsequent establishment of the tent embassy at parliament house in 1972 (Dunbar-Hall 2006). Perhaps the most internationally famous of these bands was Yothu Yindi, who’s song “Treaty” called for political recognition for Australian Indigenous peoples in line with other Indigenous peoples worldwide (Stubington and Dunbar-Hall 1994). Significantly, this song had commercial success and brought the music of Yothu Yindi into the mainstream in the early 1990s. Importantly, authors such as Dunbar-Hall (2006) stress, this music has always been about more than protest, but also survival; a reclamation and preservation of culture; a way to “keep on telling those stories” (p 131).

As such, while there is clear evidence Indigenous Australian Hip-Hop closely aligns with, and borrows from, American-centric Hip-Hop history and culture (Mitchell 2006b), it can also be seen as a powerful reinterpretation of contemporary indigenous identity. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s Indigenous Hip-Hop artists have not only referenced their historical mistreatment at the hands of the colonisers, and the removal of removal of Indigenous peoples from their traditional land, but also “what it means to be a young Aboriginal person living in a disadvantaged urban setting” (Morgan and Warren 2011, 937). Yet those such as Stavras argue that, like their musical predecessors, the music of these artists is more than just protest music, but also reasserts “ownership over the truth, continuing the oral tradition of storytelling and maintaining the spoken word as the vehicle of knowledge” (Stavras 2005, 51).

Yet, like most Indigenous music in Australia (Crooke 2008), and despite evidence Indigenous communities were the first to establish Hip-Hop scenes, this music has until recently remained on the distant margins of mainstream cultural production in Australia: “usually invisible and inaudible in the oral histories which have taken place over the years in the mainstream street press and numerous website forums about Australian Hip-Hop” (Mitchell 2006a, 125).

Indigenous Hip-Hop in Australia Today: the case of A.B. Original

While Indigenous Hip-Hop may have once operated on the margins, today there are several artists who have positioned themselves as front and center on national radio, online music charts, large music festivals, and have made headlines in social, print and television media along the way. Two of the most notable are Briggs and Trials, who’s joint project A.B. Original is the flagship act of Australia’s first Indigenous Hip-Hop record label, Bad Apples Music, set up and run by Briggs himself.

Hailing from the country town of Shepparton in the traditional country of his Yorta Yorta people, Briggs entered the Hip-Hop scene in 2005 (Mills 2012). By 2009 he had released a self-funded EP, and was supporting Australia’s biggest Hip-Hop act, the Hilltop Hoods, on their European tour. The group signed him to their label, Golden Era Records, and he released his first album in 2010 (Golden Era Records 2017), including a single that quickly reached number three on the iTunes charts (Steps 2010). Within two years he had opened for some of the biggest USA Hip-Hop acts, including Ice-Cube, and Ghostface Killah, and became featured on national television and radio (Golden Era Records 2017).
Briggs’ third album, *Sheplife* was released in 2014. It debuted at 14 in the national charts, drew critical acclaim, and helped build his public profile which included numerous high profile media spotlight stories, and acting roles on national television. It has also led to recording projects with other internationally acclaimed Indigenous musicians including Yolngu singer-songwriter Gurrumul. Briggs has used his growing public profile to be unapologetically outspoken about Indigenous issues. Infamously, this includes publically challenging the treatment of the high profile Indigenous footballer Adam Goodes, by fans and the media (Pierik 2015), as well as several instances where social media users post pictures and comments about using blackface (Carr 2016). Despite significant backlash from members of the public and some media outlets, such moves appeared to have only furthered to promote Briggs’ work. Not only was his latest album named Album of the Year National Indigenous Music Awards in 2015, but this year also joined the presenter team of one of Australia’s major news programs (*The Music* 2017b).

Hailing from Ngarrindjeri country, South Australia, Trials has played a big part of the growing Australian Hip-Hop community as part of the award nominated group the Funkoars which formed around 1999. Releasing their first album in 2003, the group went on to release several albums and EPs, and tour with many big Australian Hip-Hop acts such as the Hilltop Hoods, and for large acts such as Public Enemy and Gangstarr. Trials released solo work as an MC, and garnered a reputation as one of Australia’s top Hip-Hop producers, winning several ARIAs work done with a long list of Australia’s biggest Hip-Hop artists.

Briggs and Trials have a history of collaboration through supporting verses on different tracks over the years. While a practice not uncommon in Hip-Hop communities the world over, a collaborative live TV performance with Gurrumul, as part of NAIDOC week in 2014, sparked the decision to form the group A.B. Original (Always Black, Original). This partnership has gone on to shake up the music industry, politics, and public opinion in Australia. Since then the pair have released their first single, “January 26”. This has seen A.B. Original continue to make national headlines. Referencing the date of the British Colonisers arrived in Australia, and the subsequent national holiday, Australia Day, “January 26” issues a poignant and unapologetic account of what the date, which the country uses to celebrate ‘being Australian’, means to many Indigenous people. A.B. Original have collaborated with internationally acclaimed musician Dan Sultan on this track. By using a mix of clever lyricism, wit, and profanity set to a musical backdrop clearly inspired by 1990s Californian G-Funk, the song challenges mainstream Australia to reconsider what they are celebrating. The song received a mountain of press, being the first ever challenge to the otherwise hallowed date to be so blunt in such a public forum:

I remember all the blood and what carried us
They remember twenty recipes for lamington
Yeah, their ancestors got a boat ride
Both mine saw them coming until they both died
Fuck celebrating days made of misery
While Aus still got the black history
And that shirt will get you banned from the Parliament
If you ain’t having a conversation, well then we starting it

(Rankine, Briggs, and Sultan 2016)

And start a conversation they did. Along with fueling major existing debates about changing the date of the public holiday, the song also sparked several new ones in both mainstream and social media about White privilege, racism, the treatment of Indigenous Australians by mainstream society and governments and even immigration policies. The sheer magnitude of the song’s influence can be seen in a simple Google search for ‘January 26’: a date that for over 200 years has celebrated the date of the first fleet of English ships landed (and thus the start of White Settlement and colonisation), and more recently associated with Australia’s biggest public holiday, now features the YouTube clip of the group’s song at the top of the results, followed by a Wikipedia entry about the national holiday, and a range of subsequent entries arguing for and against its celebration (many of which directly or indirectly reference the song).

The title of their subsequent album *Reclaim Australia*, issued a deliberate challenge to a social movement of the same name that has risen amongst white Australians in recent years. This movement is intent on ‘reclaiming Australia’ from perceived risks of immigration and multiculturalism that allegedly undermine white Australian values (Johns 2017). It seems apparent that A.B. Original in their song “January 26” are in fact referencing the irony a movement that fails to acknowledge the damage to Indigenous Australians as a result
of the continuing colonial project in this country. The theme of disaffection is reinforced in the other songs on the album, which bring further attention to Australia’s history of mistreatment of Indigenous communities and the ongoing injustices committed, while at the same time proudly and defiantly celebrating Indigenous identity.

A.B. Original also makes clear links between their music and USA Hip-Hop music from the 1990s, predominately West-Coast Hip-Hop. These links are heard through lyrics borrowed from, and therefore paying homage to, rap artists such as Ice-Cube (one-time member of Compton Hip-Hop group N.W.A.), as well as the clear sonic parallels to the beats and style of this era. The group have confirmed this deliberate referencing to West-Coast Hip-Hop which challenged the police and government surveillance of the lives of black communities, in media and other interviews. In particular, A.B. Original cite the influence of West-Coast Hip-Hop both musically and in terms of their “in your face” mode of delivery of their social and political messages.

A.B. Original make clear links between the struggles and politics of African American communities and those of Indigenous people in Australia as is demonstrated by the title of songs such as “2 Black 2 Strong” (Clune 2017). This is not only the name of rapper from NYC whose lyrics spoke about the historic and systemic oppression of African-Americans, and but also to Malcolm X’s famous “Fire and Fury” speech, which was also sampled by political Hip-Hop artists such as Public Enemy. More than this ‘2 Black, 2 Strong’ is a clear reference to how Aboriginal people proudly speak in Aboriginal English about themselves in the face of domination by mainstream Australians. A sense of solidarity with African American Hip-Hop and its messages is further demonstrated as A.B. Original gain increasing respect among Hip-Hop artists and other musicians from the States. This is evidenced through guest appearances on the Reclaim Australia album by artists such as Guilty Simpson and King T. It is also endorsed by their invitation to support Californian heavy metal group Body Count, fronted by rapper Ice-T, on their recent Australian Tour (The Music 2017a).

Importantly, A.B. Original’s album debuted at number 10 in the national charts, and with this it gained the highest Australian album debut of 2016 (Chatterjee 2016). The album went on to gain critical acclaim, receiving unprecedented press coverage for an Australian Hip-Hop album, and was awarded the Australian Music Prize. Not only were the first Indigenous artists to receive the prize, but judges labelled it a “cultural landmark” (Triple J 2017). This prize drew intense critique from some mainstream media outlets, who in several headline stories questioned why an album “attacking a national holiday” could be deserving of such an award (John 2017). Yet, again it seems this furthered A.B. Original’s goal of starting a conversation about the significance of 26th of January to all Australians, and again drew further media coverage on the topics raised.

Yet, rather than resting on their laurels by focusing on their new-found fame or the success of their individual careers, Briggs and Trials of A.B. Original have instead continued to use their public exposure and growing public personas as a platform to bring attention to issues facing contemporary Indigenous Australians. One clear example of this is their latest single, “Report to the Mist”, which was released in conjunction with a stand-alone website that hosts the music video (www.reporttothemist.com). This song and accompanying video appraises a range of statistics and quotes on Indigenous incarceration rates, deaths in custody, and mistreatment of Indigenous Australians by police and the justice system. Yet, despite the overt Indigenous intent of their music, A.B. Original never stray too far from the American roots of their Hip-Hop music. Once again referencing the foundations of Hip-Hop the lyrics of “Report to the Mist” are set to a musical backdrop that emulates Trap music coming out of Atlanta, USA.

In addition, and following a common theme in Indigenous contemporary music in Australia (as observed by the first author of this paper), A.B. Original have taken on board a tradition of supporting Indigenous community through their collaboration with other Indigenous artists. Over half of their songs feature Indigenous singer-songwriters including Archie Roach, Gurrumul, Dan Sultan and Thelma Plum. This ethic extends beyond cameos on A.B. Original’s album. The group’s record label, Bad Apples Music, is now home to a number of up and coming Indigenous Hip-Hop artists. One example is Birdz, an artist originally from the Northern Territory, who also uses his music to speak of the inequalities and injustices faced by Indigenous communities. Importantly, the practice of supporting fellow community in this way also follows a Hip-Hop tradition, where many rappers support the success of friends and fellow rappers from their local neighborhoods through including them in their music, film-clips and production (Forman 2002). And this practice establishes broader links between Indigenous Australian Hip-Hop and the roots of Hip-Hop as produced by African American and Latino exponents, connecting to a broader social discourse through songs like Birdz’s “Black Lives Matter”,

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Latino exponents, connecting to a broader social discourse through songs like Birdz’s “Black Lives Matter”, linking between Indigenous Australian Hip-Hop and the roots of Hip-Hop as produced by African American and Latino exponents, connecting to a broader social discourse through songs like Birdz’s “Black Lives Matter”,
which not only references the social movement in the United states but also speaks of the relevance of the movement in Australia.

Conclusion
It is our contention, as we have argued throughout this paper, that Hip-Hop can creatively and dynamically integrate Indigenous knowledge and experience. As we have demonstrated, this is being successfully achieved by artists such as A.B. Original who are actively using uniquely Indigenous frameworks within a Hip-Hop culture as a platform for commentary on issues of social justice, not only for Indigenous peoples, but for the oppressed more broadly. In so doing these Indigenous Hip-Hop artists call on traditions within Aboriginal Australian culture to make their point explicit delivering it within a language common to all Australians. Yet, importantly, the duo has also done so in a way that also builds upon the strengths of the history of the original Hip-Hop culture from its birthplace in the US. Their work has explicitly located within a music framework of this original culture, both sonically, and in a way, that maintains socio-political links back to the experiences of oppressed and minority peoples in the USA. Briggs and Trials have also gained support from the international Hip-Hop community in this journey, including endorsement through affiliation and collaboration with some of the biggest and most important actors in the Hip-Hop world. So too have key members of the Australian Hip-Hop community rallied to support the pair (Carr 2016), again signalling how the potential strength of pairing Hip-Hop culture and Indigenous knowledge. What’s more, all of this has been achieved in a way that maintains a distinctly localised positionality; the pair uses of a particular form of humour instantly recognisable to most Australians regardless of their background. Australian humour calls on irony and sarcasm to reveal an essential nature of Australian identity based on larrikinism and mateship. Hence, A.B. Original’s call out of the majority of Australia’s lack of concern for the lives of Indigenous people in this country when they say most Australians would prefer to watch a show like the Bachelor than be concerned with the reality of Australian history where so many Aboriginal people were massacred as a consequence of invasion by British settlers:

How you wanna raise a flag with a rifle
To make us want to celebrate anything but survival?
Nah, you watchin’ tele for The Bachelor
But wouldn’t read a book about afuckload of massacres?
(Rankine, Briggs, and Sultan 2016)

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