

Revolutionizing Environmental Education through Indigenous Hip Hop Culture

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Abstract

Based upon the life histories of six Indigenous hip hop artists of the Beat Nation artist collective, this essay captures how Indigenous hip hop has the potential to revolutionize environmental education. Hip hop provides Indigenous youth an emancipatory space to raise their opposition to neocolonial controls of Indigenous territories that denigrate traditional ways of life, and to gather strength by engaging in the decolonizing processes of reclaiming their land, culture, language, and identity. Hip hop also helps youth recognize authentic dialogic education; build knowledge of Indigenous culture, language, and history; and develop strategies to change oppressive forces into resilient personal practices that transform Indigenous communities. This study is motivated by a commitment to showcase how alternative youth culture has the potential to resist neoliberal policies fueling neocolonialism and environmental devastation in Canada.

Résumé

La présente thèse, qui s'appuie sur la vie de six artistes hip-hop autochtones du collectif Beat Nation, illustre bien dans quelle mesure le hip-hop autochtone peut révolutionner l'éducation environnementale. Le hip-hop procure aux jeunes autochtones un moyen émancipateur de manifester leur opposition à la tutelle néocoloniale des territoires autochtones, dénigrante envers le mode de vie traditionnel, et leur donne le courage d'entamer le processus de décolonisation, c.-à-d., la reprise de possession de leurs terres, leur culture, leur langue et leur identité. Le hip-hop aide également les jeunes à prendre conscience d'une éducation dialogique authentique, à acquérir des connaissances sur la culture, la langue et l'histoire autochtone, et à élaborer des stratégies visant à canaliser les forces oppressives en pratiques de résistance individuelles et ainsi transformer les collectivités autochtones. Cette étude a été décidée par la volonté de mettre en évidence le potentiel de résistance de la culture des jeunes aux politiques néolibérales nourrissant le néocolonialisme et la dévastation environnementale au Canada.

Keywords: hip hop, Indigenous culture, neoliberalism, dialogue, decolonization, social justice

Indigenous Culture and Neoliberalism

For the past decade, transformative Indigenous scholars have studied and articulated how Western political, economic, and religious systems have worked to control Indigenous lands and territories, and how Eurocentric forces shape the daily experiences of Indigenous peoples (Alfred, 2008; Borrows & Rotman, 2003; Marker, 2003). In the Canadian context, politicians have historically used the legal system to dislodge the vast majority of original Indigenous landholdings and controlled the “bureaucratic, legislative and educative filters” (Green, 1995, p. 87) such as residential schools, religious conversion, missions, and governmental influence, to colonize its Indigenous peoples. The current manifestation of neocolonialism in Canada, as illustrated, in part, by the fact that Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution (Walkem & Bruce, 2003) which mandates the fiduciary obligation to fund Aboriginal education systems equally with non-Aboriginal/provincial school systems, has yet to be fulfilled by a federal government (Constitution Act, 1982). While it may appear to non-Indigenous Canadians as though Indigenous peoples can readily reclaim their territories, culture, and language, in this era of neoliberal globalization (Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 2005), Indigenous communities continue to be dependent upon federal/provincial governments for social services and employment opportunities while the state is regularly ceding its responsibility to the corporate world for provision of these services (Atleo, 2008; Slowey, 2008). Environmentally, more and more Indigenous communities are being compelled to “economically develop” their pristine lands to resource extraction corporations, compromising their Indigenous rights and principles in the process in order to feed their family members (Atleo, 2008; Slowey, 2001).

Neoliberal values privilege a market-based, consumer/producer dichotomy, reinforcing the development of social structures marked by alienation and commodification, not unity and spirituality—thereby emphasizing and reproducing the marginalization of Indigenous cultures (Hirst & Vadeboncoeur, 2006; King, 2011; Malcomson, 2000; Ujam & El-Fiki, 2006). Neoliberal policies privilege individualism and materialism, two very Western values, while undermining Aboriginal values of communal and metaphysical connections. Despite the reality that many non-Indigenous Canadians (and even some Indigenous community members) support neocolonial initiatives, masked as neoliberal economic development and designed to extract land and denigrate Indigenous culture, more Indigenous community members are becoming cognizant that the current wave of neoliberal/neocolonialism is having pernicious impacts on Indigenous traditional and treaty rights. They recognize decolonizing projects that emphasize and re-affirm Indigenous culture, language, and identity are the best way for Indigenous communities and youth to resist this neocolonialism (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Parent, 2009; Root, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Youth Culture and Indigenous Hip hop

Hip hop is rooted in struggle and resistance. However, neither its roots nor its shoots are reducible to a single culture, nation, or race. George (1998), in his exploration of the roots of contemporary hip hop culture, characterizes hip hop as “multifaceted and interactive” (p. ix). He explains:

Battling may be essential to hip hop’s evolution and the energy that keeps it dynamic, but its manifestations and effects are too complex and often contradictory for a single metaphor, no matter how resonant, to capture its essence. There is the will to battle, but other threads in its fabric involve fun, dance, literature, crime, sex, and politics—too many to simply say that hip hop means any one or even two things. (p. ix)

George also asserts that hip hop reflects a “different way of telling the story of civil rights and the generation that fought for them on both sides of the color line” (p. viii). Although he is referring specifically to the civil rights conflicts in the mid-20th century United States, his claims maintain validity today. Hip hop is a uniquely youth-oriented art form that does not merely allow for resistance; it embraces struggle as essential to existence (George, 1998; Grinde & Johansen, 1991; Manfredi & Rush, 2008; Weinstein, 2007). As contemporary neoliberal policies contribute to alienation and even nihilism for Indigenous youth (Tuck, in press), hip hop offers hope.

In this study, we examine Indigenous community members who are seizing the opportunity to strengthen their cultural identity, language, and traditions through the innovative art forms associated with hip hop culture, such as break dancing, graffiti art, spoken word, and song. For these Indigenous artists, like youth across the globe who increasingly face global racialized poverty, degradation of their cultural background, over-policing of their communities, and joblessness, the cultural manifestations and activists’ agendas proffered by rap pioneers in the US such as Public Enemy, the Coup, and Afrika Bambaataa still speak to alienation and oppression encountered by youth in Canadian urban centers and Aboriginal communities. Youth have been inspired by numerous contemporary Aboriginal artists, such as Skeena Reece and James Nicholas, to recognize how the larger settler colonial society causes pain and alienation, to express the spirit and richness of Indigenous peoples and cultures, and to educate other Indigenous youth about their rights, histories, and cultures. Ultimately, hip hop offers the possibility for Indigenous youth to experience cultural reconciliation between their ancestral heritage and their contemporary urban world—reconciliation that has transformative social justice potential. Rather than seek to move “beyond” their Indigenous community and “progress” toward neoliberal/Western values that are often mistaken for “success” in modern society, hip hop enables youth to connect their experiences, validate their beliefs, and construct meaningful forms of

resistance and activism (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Hill & Ladson-Billings, 2009; Porfilio & Carr, 2010; Willard, 2009).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the experiences of six Indigenous hip hop artists who are members of the Beat Nation, a non-profit society run by a board of working Indigenous artists. Beat Nation's purpose is to maintain a distinct cultural space accessible to artists and audiences. This space is intentionally public; it manifests through exhibits in bricks-and-mortar public museums (such as the Vancouver Art Gallery), through freely available internet sites, and through graffiti tags and performance art that might be perceived as vandalism or street-level disruption. Moreover, the politically conscious space that Indigenous hip hop artists create is extended through studies such as this. Fine and Weis (2000) explain:

[We] acknowledge that there are no neutral spaces, that all spaces are 'political' insofar as they are infused with questions of power and privilege. All spaces suffer the burdens of social contradictions. None are insulated from racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. As such, all spaces carry the capacity and power to enable, restrict, applaud, stigmatize, erase, or complicate threads of youth identity and their ethical commitments. (p. xiii)

Based on interviews conducted as life history portrayals (Ballivian & Herrera, 2012; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Roberts, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) with each artist-participant, we argue that elements of hip hop culture, particularly Indigenous hip hop culture, can revolutionize education in general, and environmental education specifically, in two ways. First, for all youth, but Indigenous youth in particular, hip hop raises awareness and consciousness about the deleterious impacts settler colonialism has had on the intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being of Indigenous communities. Second, hip hop as an alternative, inherently non-conformist art form engenders alternative visions of the social world, such as one that is free from environmental or land degradation, greed, and exploitation.

Hip hop intellectuals' narratives support several key tenets of an Indigenous land-based pedagogy: building relationships on the ideals of stewardship and respect with every member of the environmental community, valuing localized and traditional knowledge, and identifying with place and community (Biermann & Townsend Cross, 2008; Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002; Styres, 2011). Our argument involves a conceptual and historical exploration of how hip hop encourages flexible ways of knowing, specifically developed through a consideration of what counts as knowledge, schooling and education, definitions of literacy, and how these interrelate with new understandings of environmental education. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) note that different ways of knowing result in differences in how people experience, navigate within, and construct the cultural and material world:

Although Western science and education tend to emphasize compartmentalized knowledge that is often decontextualized and taught in the detached setting of a classroom or laboratory, Indigenous people have traditionally acquired their knowledge through direct experience in the natural world. For them, the particulars come to be understood in relation to the whole, and the “laws” are continually tested in the context of everyday survival. (p. 11)

As neoliberal values permeate the fabric of social and public life, bureaucratic, Western, positivist ways of knowing threaten to drown out flexible, sustainable ways of knowing exemplified by Indigenous communities. We argue that hip hop offers new ways to reinvent, amplify, and strengthen the voices of Indigenous youth within urban Canadian and Indigenous communities.

Indigenous Hip Hop in the Academy

For the past several years, we, as two White, critical, multicultural researchers, have been interested in studying the cultural manifestations of globalized youth. Our aims are to better understand how neoliberal globalization is affecting youth’s experiences inside and outside of schools, to help youth find new ways to confront the social actors and institutions responsible for the myriad sources of social oppression, and to re-imagine how identity and culture are preserved, paradoxically, through new forms of technologies (Gorlewski, 2010; Porfilio & Malott, 2011; Porfilio & Watz, 2010).

We were both raised by families who taught us to fight for social justice, who taught us to value community, and to advocate for marginalized populations. We have also been acculturated into the academy—a place that is not traditionally inclusive (Barnhardt, 2002). Our commitment to critical pedagogies has steered us towards work that validates the voices and lives of colonized Aboriginal youth in Canada. Through this, we strive for a deeper understanding of decolonization that is capable of disrupting the oppressive forces impacting all races, cultures, and facets of life across the planet (Iseke-Barnes & Jiménez Estrada, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). By exploring, understanding, and amplifying the voices of Indigenous youth and hip hop artists, we seek to improve Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal relations and environmental conversations through hip hop art, Indigenous culture, and youth empowerment.

In our research on educational initiatives that empower and highlight socially generative youth cultural manifestations and activism in Canada, we became aware of the Beat Nation.¹ After examining the organization’s website, reading about the Beat Nation members’ activist work, watching the artists’ videos, and examining their lyrics, photos, and sculptures, we connected with the curators and producer of the Beat Nation. They, in turn, connected us with the artists, and we were able to set up interviews to understand their experiences with hip hop culture and being an Indigenous artist in Canada.

We selected the life history approach as a methodology that might bridge the cultural differences between researchers and participants. Life history, derived as a focused version of oral history qualitative method, has been used to investigate the experiences of hip hop artists (Ballivian & Herrera, 2012) as well as Indigenous youth (Allwood & Rogers, 2002). Life history is a particularly appropriate method for this study because it offers the following advantages:

1. A rejection of positivism (the idea that social sciences can uncover empirical reality/truth through standardized methodologies),
2. A growing interest in the life course,
3. An increased concern with lived experience and how to best reveal it, and
4. A rise in the popularity of qualitative research and disillusionment with static approaches to data collection. (Roberts, 2002, pp. 4-5)

Because we sought to understand how hip hop had influenced participants' identity development as well as how these effects might extend into future cultural movements, our life history interviews were conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews focused on youth, culture, and the consumption and production of hip hop.

Life Histories: Linking Past, Present, and Possibility

Although eighteen members of the Beat Nation were invited to participate in the study, only six hip hop artists agreed. In this study, all of the participants are Indigenous women who range in age from 26 to 41. All self-identify as First Nation (Canada) or Native North American (US). Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of our participants.

Due to funding and scheduling constraints (Beat Nation participants travel extensively to complete and share their work), interviews were conducted during the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2011 via Skype, and digitally recorded. The research questions addressed were: How do associations with grassroots organizations affect the identity construction of young people? How do youth-led organizations influence the identities of Indigenous youths in Canada, particularly with respect to connections with their heritage, literacies, experiences of schooling, and attitudes toward society and social change?

We developed our study based on life history experiences constructed from in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed and then analyzed. While academic institutions privilege Euro-Western knowledges that differ greatly from Indigenous ways of knowing, we sought to bridge these differences by using life histories of the Beat Nation artists, focused on open-ended interview questions to reveal narratives of cultural identity formation in their youth and with youth currently in their collective. In addition, we attempted to explain ourselves as White researchers wanting to improve the relationship between Indigenous and

non-Indigenous cultures, and by establishing trust with our participants and clearly stating our intention to share their experiences to challenge dominant Eurocentric neoliberal ideologies. By situating ourselves as critical scholars, establishing our purpose of learning about the Beat Nation artists' experiences counteracting settler colonialism through artistic endeavors, and seeking to give back to the Indigenous community by amplifying their voices, we hoped to approach and engage some of the core principles of Indigenous research (Kovach, 2009).

Beat Nation: Indigenous Hip hop for Urban Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Indigenous hip hop, as a movement represented by the Beat Nation, provides a new urban space for free cultural expression that is both unique and shared by the artists. The six artist-participants offered insights for understanding urban youth cultural identities² and possibilities of education that are emerging in this dynamic socio-political space. During the life history interviews, artist members of the Beat Nation collective regularly narrated awareness of how dominant cultural definitions of knowledge controlled their experiences of schooling and dictated Eurocentric ways of knowing as the right (White) ways, while erasing or negating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. Colonial schooling failed to acknowledge Indigenous culture and language and avoided examining how social and political institutions were designed to subjugate Indigenous peoples while privileging Euro-Western, capitalistic ways of knowing, teaching, and learning. Craden, a 30-year-old Beat Nation hip hop artist who describes her cultural background as “mixed Native and European” and who has lived most of her life on the northwest coast of Canada, explained:

I guess in high school I was more definitely unaware of where I was from because I grew up outside of my home territories so I didn't really have much connection outside of the family that I had around me. ... There wasn't much stuff in school about where I was from. So I didn't learn anything from academics, anyways, during high school. I had my mom kind of always reinforcing stuff with me but I didn't really get too interested into it [Indigenous culture] until I was about 18 and I moved out on my own.

Although her mother had attended a residential school, Craden's formal experiences of primary and secondary school curriculum omitted this critical chapter of colonial history. She described this omission:

Up in Canada, they were called Residential Schools... My mom went to one and I didn't even know that until – like, she never really told me about it until after high school. And I wasn't aware of it from high school teachings. Like, most of the stuff we learned was... definitely geared [toward] a “pro-Canada,” I would say, kind of stance or history courses, and there wasn't much in the way of learning about different forms of [colonization] taking over the land or different tactics and diseases and stuff like that. We never learned about any of that stuff.

Later in the interview, Craden contrasted these experiences of Euro-Western schooling (colonial models) with learning experiences centered in First Nation or Indigenous cultural settings:

Actually, I had to move to the city to start that education. And different youth programs in the city helped me. ... I went on three different canoe quests which were up and down the coast where I learned a lot about my culture and protocols and language; I started learning some of the language at that point.

The experiences described by Craden provide a critical perspective on the experiences of Indigenous youth in schools that too often reproduce the Eurocentric status quo. Craden's story echoes Giroux's (1981) assertion of the need to transform pedagogies in alternative spaces to challenge "classroom knowledge," which is "often treated as an external body of information, the production of which appears to be independent of human beings. From this perspective, objective knowledge is viewed as independent of time and place; it becomes universalized, ahistorical knowledge" (p. 19). In contrast, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes the importance of honouring Indigenous knowledge and embracing a stance of dissent, preservation, and protection of culture.

When asked about her sense of Indigenous cultural identity and how her educational experiences related to that identity, Craden implicated education as a form of marginalization or colonization:

I guess it was when I finally moved out on my own into Vancouver. I think it was definitely at that point where I felt really disconnected from the dominant society I guess, or Canadian society. I felt more an urge to learn more about the [Indigenous] history and learn about, like, my culture and try to reconnect with my family because...I had moved in with my mom for a little bit in Vancouver and she was always kind of pushing me to make those discoveries. I was kind of resistant to them at first but once I started getting into it and I started learning about the history, it was negative...It had a negative impact on me as well. I felt like, basically, you know, my whole elementary and high school education was basically a big lie and I felt kind of gypped [sic] there. ... I would say the arts...the education that I've had in the arts and the community have been more beneficial for me.

Here, Craden narrates the need to interrupt how educational institutions in Canada represent the Canadian colonial experience. They tell "a big lie" by perpetuating the idea that Canadian experience centered on building an inclusive society, without capturing the historical legacy of institutional discrimination encountered by minoritized groups. Craden's mom, along with her work in the "arts and the community," became central components in overcoming her alienation and marginalization in schools. She learned about the importance of Indigenous culture, of the historical oppression faced by Indigenous people in Canada, and of reconnecting with her family.

Hip Hop for Language, Knowledge, and Indigenous Education

Lara Sharp, a 41-year-old hip hop artist who spends a significant time sharing her work in schools with the goal of empowering young people, describes how hip hop can expand notions of literacy in ways that are grounded in the cultural experiences of students:

I just try and get kids writing [hip hop]. I'm working in schools where a lot of kids do already write. And if they're not writing and they're from, you know, rez communities where the teachers maybe don't give a shit or there might not be enough money coming into the schools to actually get the kids the tools they need, I know those kids are listening to hip hop. So the only thing that I can do is go in there and show them the kind of hip hop that I make.

I come in as I am and I show kids the hip hop I make, which is storytelling. ... And I just try to really show the kids that storytelling is; it is your literature. ... I just try and remind them that rap music is a vehicle for those kids to tell their own story in a passionate and bold way. So despite how boring school might be, if they can focus on writing poetry and writing stories and being authentic then they're kind of teaching themselves how to read; they're teaching themselves how to write and read by rapping. ...

Like I know that hip hop has become a very, very commercial art form but that aspect of it, the global outreach and the fact that everybody loves hip hop now, is a potentially invaluable tool for literacy.

Lara's work embodies her belief that current conceptions of knowledge, as they are enacted in Eurocentric educational settings (including "rez" or on-reserve schools), are disempowering for Indigenous youth. It is not useful to allow colonial definitions of what counts as knowledge to dominate youth experiences. Transformational, critical pedagogies, such as hip hop, involve deliberate efforts to engage in genuine dialogue.

Kay Williams, a 27-year-old university student and artist-member of Beat Nation, explains the importance of engaging in shared dialogue to unearth how dominant modes of thought, oppressive policies, and social relations have marginalized Indigenous groups for centuries:

I feel like if you're in a state of consciousness and respect that you won't be pedantic or oppressive in that relationship, that you will be open to new things and understand that, you know, a teacher is a facilitator of evolution both ways, so you will learn from them as much as they will learn from you.

Conceptions of knowledge that are constantly being constructed and reconstructed in dynamic, authentic dialogues, such as through the art of the Beat Nation members, represent a means of interrupting dominant neocolonial discourses that work against social justice. As Erasmus (cited in Korteweg, Gonzalez, & Guillet, 2010) states, Indigenous-non-Indigenous dialogue, Indigenous

identity, and the formation of a national community are all connected:

I want to suggest how dialogue with Indigenous people might be framed in different terms, looking for language that expresses Indigenous perspectives and also connects with the aspirations of a wide spectrum of Canadians. Creating and sustaining a national community is an ongoing act of imagination, fuelled by stories of who we are. (p. 331)

Sandra, a hip hop artist who describes herself as “mixed blood Cree” was expelled from a Canadian college of art and a Canadian university. Today, she enacts her beliefs about the importance of Indigenous language, literacy, and cultural identity with marginalized groups. When asked what advice she would give to Indigenous youth, she stated:

Well, of course I'd tell them to learn their language. That's easy. I mean, I've done work over the years in Aboriginal communities where what me and a colleague did was we would ask kids what were their colloquialisms that they would use and then we would translate them. Say, into Cree, and then we would say, “Learn it in this language, learn the rhythm of it, feel the rhythm of it, you know, it's a different rhythm.”

She notes the importance of embodying language: feeling its spirit and strength as it collects into and then emanates from the mouth and body. Building on the significance of language, identity, and empowerment through education centered on hip hop, Sandra described her most recent project:

[I'm] doing a really great project over the next two years....It's going into women's prisons all across this country and conducting a five-day song writing workshop and at the end of the five days, recording the song that we wrote together, and I'm hoping to make an album out of that. And it's been a really interesting process because I use the existing literacy programs within prisons as the platform to deliver [the curriculum] ...

I get to work with these women who've been silenced by the world, basically. I mean, prison is kind of the last place you send somebody because to sentence somebody to prison is pretty much a life [of] incarceration. That person then becomes part of that whole mechanism and will always have a record, will always have a rap sheet, will always have, you know, those connections then to that sort of harder life. So it's really been a wonderful project to go and sort of allow women, to show them how beautiful it is that they can express themselves and write some really kick ass songs.

Later in the interview, Sandra described another current project, this one related specifically to connecting Indigenous language, hip hop music, and environment:

For Cree people, we have a real sense of a relationship between the land and our ability to speak and sound our worldview in context of where we are [on the land]. So my current project that I'm working on is a project ... where I boost different

locations and traverse the landscape and basically sing the landscape. Either I sing the contours of the horizon or I sing other rhythms and melodies that are apparent to me in that landscape. And thematically, then, within the songs that I'm composing, the songs are usually somewhat reflective of people that I meet or situations that occur along the way, that in some way, I can engage with, internalize and then come up with lyrics. Mostly in English to date but I'm starting to write them actually in Cree and that reflects that relationship.

Sandra's explicit connection between her hip hop work, language, and land resonates with Korteweg, Gonzalez, and Guillet's (2010) view of the saliency of connecting Indigenous people's perceptions and experiences to environmental education and research. It also echoes the possibilities of the interrelations among youth culture, popular culture, and hip hop, focusing on the ways that youth culture is constructed through the production and consumption of popular culture in all its forms. Sandra pointed particularly to the ways Indigenous youth engage with forms of hip hop as a means of expression to encourage and enact strength, resilience, resistance, and empowerment:

Well, I think what's really important about Aboriginal youth using this form [hip hop] is that many of them are becoming savvy to sort of what the form is. And I think that's always really important. ... And as long as they can master sufficiently the form they will be heard. You know, their voices will be actually acknowledged.

I think that's really important...especially when you look at the legacy of the residential schools. What they [colonizers of the residential schools] left here in this land with people not being able to speak their language and people not being able to express themselves. ... I think the thing that I also find really heartening is that as someone's commitment to the form deepens, that's usually when they start becoming more aware of history and the other connections both within their own worldview and teaching them the history and the roots of the form [hip hop].

The hip hop artists who participated in this study articulated a sense of place and time that seeks to undo the erased or negated Indigenous culture—to eradicate and re-place what has been erected as colonial education (schooling). This is being accomplished in the Beat Nation project as hip hop is, in the words of one participant, "public intervention." Artists described using graffiti and various kinds of traditional media and performance art to interrupt the dominant misrepresentations of Indigenous culture, urban identity, and connection to land/environment. When asked about the interconnections among youth culture, empowerment, and decolonization, Craden explained:

I think...and by using hip hop in my classes, I think that gives them a new perspective of what youth are going through. But I think also, it gives them a new perspective of youth by, you know, viewing them as intelligent, viewing them as creative and getting beyond those stereotypical representations. So I think hip hop is an important slice for education and it's an important slice for youth.

Lana emphasizes the importance of true dialogue in her art between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures—not merely repeating or transmitting messages from hegemonic neocolonial sources, but rather heeding the experiences and interpretations of youth about imminent environmental disasters or crises. She explained: “There’s no room for pointing fingers. We’re on a crucial collapse as a planet and there is no room for pointing fingers at each other. There’s only room for listening.” Similarly, Kay, when asked about her role in society as an Indigenous hip hop artist, underscored connections to the land as well as her commitment to interrupting dominant neocolonial and neoliberal discourses. Describing herself as a “shit disturber” and as one who “likes to turn over rocks,” she provided an example of her actions that represent this stance:

I don’t really support the glorification of war heroes very much. And there’s war monuments in every city and so I used to always take just fatty markers, those big fat wide tips and I used to put the question, “Hero?” at the base of those statues with a question mark. So I know it’s defacing public property but I really enjoyed...I really enjoyed, you know, staying in a city for three weeks and watch the city try and take the marker stain off because what used to happen was the stain would just get wider. They would go and brush it off and then I would just go in again at night and get the center of the letters deeper.

Two clear ideas emerge from the Beat Nations’ life history portrayals and undergird the possibilities of social justice for Indigenous youth to join with environmental education. First, critical knowledge of colonization/decolonization is essential in the quest for liberation and self-determination. Second, knowledge validated or defined from a Eurocentric colonial imperative is part of a neocolonialist project that continues to damage Indigenous peoples and the land. Yet, new generative knowledge can emerge from the voices of colonized peoples when doing environmental education. Urban Indigenous youth stories or knowledge representations can provide the means of reconnection to cultural identity, to land-based knowledge, and to the very means of healing and empowerment that are necessary to find the strength to reclaim one’s home and homelands.

Hip Hop: Amplifying Voices of Indigenous Youth

As evidenced through the life histories of the Beat Nation artists, Aboriginal hip hop has the potential to deeply impact urban Indigenous youth and to indigenize and revolutionize (environmental) education. The voices of the hip hop artists provide a deeply important critique of the mainstream assumption that corporate neoliberalism and economic development are the answers for Indigenous peoples. The activist work of the Beat Nation hip hop artists in schools, prisons, and community organizations is dedicated to empowering Indigenous youth, to recognize how their knowledge, culture, identity, and language are the most valuable investments to transforming themselves and Canadian society.

Authentic, self-determined, and equal dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians is central to challenging dominant forms of Euro-Western thinking and neocolonial practices.

Indigenous hip hop can help make visible the ways in which land, language, and Indigenous knowledge are vital for the revitalization of the Aboriginal community, and for the protection of Indigenous homelands in the face of heightened threats by global capitalism. It reveals possibilities for linking environmental education to alternative forms of youth culture and, ultimately, to critical, transformative pedagogies. This study highlights Indigenous hip hop culture as a vital new voice and critique of how global capitalism is impacting marginalized, Indigenous populations. It is a new expression and form of Indigenous knowledge that can resist and decolonize social relationships, as well as convince non-Aboriginal Canadians that the protection of Indigenous territories and lands is the protection of our common Metis values (Saul, 2008) of balance, co-operation, inclusiveness, stewardship, respect, and our collective good.

Notes

- ¹ We would like to thank the producer, curators, and artists of the Beat Nation. They taught us a great deal about Indigenous culture as well as transformative forms of teaching and learning. They also helped us reconceptualize environmental education and research in ways that challenge injustice, elevate the importance of place and community, value flexible ways of knowing, and embrace dialogue and diversity.
- ² It is important to note that the view of “youth culture” represented in this study is defined broadly. In this research, we studied the work of social actors who consume or produce this culture, but who are not necessarily youth. This conception of youth culture clearly includes artists associated with the Beat Nation, regardless of their ages.

Notes on Contributors

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