Research Overview

Hip Hop as Methodology: Ways of Knowing

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> To listen to hip hop is to enter a world
> of complexity and contradiction.
>
> —Imani Perry (2004, p. 1)

Over the past five years I have directed and developed, in collaboration with my Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs' research team, artists, teachers, elders, community partners, and youth, a number of community hip hop arts-based projects in Saskatchewan.

These community-based programs have been shaped by the following research questions: What role does hip hop play in narrating settler/colonialism on the prairies or in the north? What happens to stories when they are (re)told through a contemporary oral practice and mediated by the discourses associated with hip-hop culture on a global scale? How does hip hop challenge contemporary Canada to think about "Aboriginal" politics and colonialism in the present and the future, rather than framing them as only relevant to the past? How does Indigenous hip hop complicate the spirit of a liberal pluralist society such as Canada?[1]

IMP Labs: Beat-making and electronic music production studio

Four years and nine Hip Hop projects later,[2] these questions, although still relevant and necessary, no longer capture how I have come to understand and theorize hip hop as a methodology, or as a conceptual model for researching and articulating ways of knowing (Covach, 2010). Transitioning away from the conventional approach to theorizing community-based arts projects as a discourse of intervention (e.g., by targeting "at risk" youth), I argue the Hip Hop Projects facilitate a recognizable sense of

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Graffiti Artwork: Iqaluit, Nunavut

Photo credit: Marsh/IMP Labs

place (Forman, 2002; Forman and Neal, 2004; Marsh 2012), connections to a global world (Mitchell, 2001; Marsh, 2009a), meaningful arts practices (Perry, 2004; Marsh 2009b), and a powerful form of expression (Ntarangwi, 2009; Marsh 2009a), which makes sense for young Indigenous people attempting to create a space for themselves, both within and outside a colonial/ settler framework (Marsh, 2009a; 2011).

Based on my experiences during these hip hop projects, I argue that, in spite of the problematic, often racialized and gendered representations associated with hip hop culture (Rose, 1994; 2008), hip hop programs have the potential to illustrate and facilitate the creative, thoughtful, and artistic subjectivities of Indigenous youth, and, importantly, to challenge the dominant racialized and racist frameworks on which the media so often relies when presenting stories on hip hop culture and Indigenous youth in Canada (Marsh, 2011).

Making beats in the IMP Labs (HHP v.3)   **O'Neill project - "No turning away"**

Bert Fox - "Treaty teachings"   **B-ing hip hop - Northern Saskatchewan**

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

As both a researcher and an active community member I have had the privilege of getting to know and cultivating relationships with many Indigenous youth in their communities, as well as in the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs at the University of Regina. I have been invited to collaborate on and/or produce workshops on the themes of storytelling, bullying, Treaty teachings, arts and athleticism, and healthy bodies.

Over the past three years, the IMP Labs have toured to many communities in central and northern Saskatchewan. I have also had the opportunity to work with several youth in Nunavut, as well as undertake research on other provocative hip hop initiatives in Winnipeg (see Streetz FM), Vancouver (see Raincity Rap), all over Northern Canada (Blue Print For Life), Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert in Saskatchewan (The Prairie Roots Hip Hop Project), and the online hip hop exhibition BeatNation (see Beat Nation). In July 2011 three of the youth who participated in the Scott Collegiate/ IMP Labs Hip Hop Projects, along with one of my graduate students, and myself, travelled to St. John's, Newfoundland to perform at and host hip hop workshops for the *Soundshift Festival* (see Soundshift) and the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM) Conference (see ICTM).

Keena assisting at the hip hop workshop at the Soundshift Festival

HHPv.2

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

These research experiences have challenged me to re-think, re-consider, and re-articulate differently my theorization of hip hip-hop culture. And although there are many projects that deserve attention and further reflection, for this discussion, this article focuses specifically on the Scott Collegiate/ IMP Labs Hip Hop Project, which has run five times, (Fall '08, Fall '09, Winter '10, Winter '11, Winter '12) and has now become fully integrated into the grade 10 curriculum at Scott Collegiate (see Scott Collegiate).

"It's about home": The Scott Collegiate/ IMP Labs hip hop project

The Scott Collegiate/IMP Labs Hip Hop Project brings grade ten students from Scott Collegiate[3] into the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs at the University of Regina two to three times a week.[4] Through workshops, performances, lectures, and informal discussions on the elements of hip hop, the students learn how to write raps, produce beats using MPCs (Music Production Center), scratch and mix records on the turntables, create graffiti artwork, and break dance. The program culminates in two performances, one for the feeder schools and one for the community, comprised entirely of the students' own hip hop works and provides the opportunity to collaborate

Performing with hip hop artist Mystic (LA) at Scott Collegiate (HHP v.2)

Photo credit: Marsh/IMP Labs

and perform with nationally and internationally recognized artists.[5]

Complementary to the IMP Labs' programming, the students work through an additional hip hop curriculum to fulfill their Arts Education and English credits. The overall goals of the project remain constant; however, the projects evolve with each cohort, and changes are made based on what is most and least successful, finances (i.e., successful grant applications, school budgets), logistics (i.e., semester format changes, availability of artists, staffing changes, et cetera), curriculum development (i.e., changes in standards), and the interests of the students. For instance, in version one and two of the project, I found the students (primarily the young men) were more inclined towards public performance-based roles, such as emceeing and b-boying, while the fourth group, was far less interested in performing their raps on stage. Rather, in this case, the majority of students preferred to engage in scratch sets on the turntables, or have someone else perform their raps.

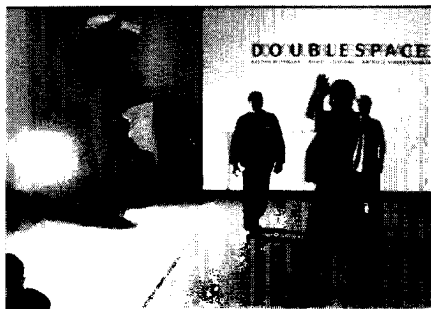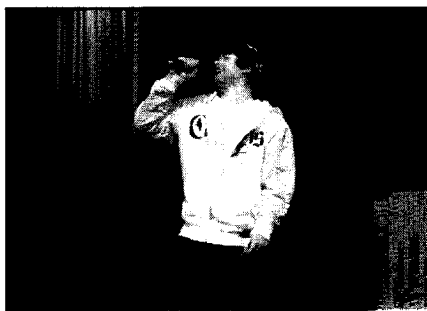**B-Boys (HHP v.1) Performing at the MacKenzie Art Gallery**

John rapping (HHP v.2)

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

Whereas in the fourth project, although every student wrote a number of raps as part of their assignments, very few were interested in performing their raps on stage (they were happy to have someone else perform their songs though). Instead the majority of this group preferred to perform scratch sets on the turntables.

In its early stages, the Hip Hop Project appealed mostly to young male students. At first this appeared to be problematic within the project, and I worried that the project might be perpetuating the assumption that hip hop was *solely* a masculinized culture; nevertheless, it became clear that, given the lower graduation rates among young men compared to women at Scott Collegiate, the Hip Hop Project fulfilled an important need to engage the young men in a curriculum that appealed to them, held their

Ethan Oliver on the turntables (HHP v.4) at Scott Collegiate

In the IMP Labs Scratch Studio (HHP v.2)

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

interest so they would complete credits, *and* made sense to them in relation to their everyday lives.

One approach I took to negate some of these gender issues was to hire a team of all female research assistants to staff the IMP Labs for the first project. These women were experts on the technologies used and were able to demonstrate, teach, and perform in at least one or more of the primary elements of hip hop.

The gender imbalance began to shift as the projects grew in popularity and the students' investments in the program increased. In the last three projects more and more young women have participated and have seen successes both on and off stage as a result of their creative contributions, particularly in technologies associated with beatmaking and scratching.

These women resist and challenge hegemonic ideas around the gendering of hip hop and its associated technologies (McCartney, 2003; Marsh, 2007; Rodgers, 2010). Nevertheless, stereotypes and normative gender roles persist, particularly in relation to public and private roles related to performance; the men have been inclined to perform on the mic and/or as a b-boy, taking a more public, "star"-like role in performing, while the young women have demonstrated a strong capacity and desire for learning

Participants with the 3 IMP Labs' research assistants Miranda Mason, Tahirih Vejdani, and Ila Wenaus (HHP v.1)

Bessie on the turntables (HHP v.4)

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

Keena Aisaican-Checkosis (HHP v.3) performing live MPC/ Ableton set with Elizabeth Curry (IMP Labs' research assistant and MA student)

Students at Flux CrossFit

Eekwol giving a rap workshop (HHP v.4.0)

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

the technologies involved in creating and finessing beats. For the most part, these beats are worked on until they are considered "finished" and then played through the sound system rather than performed live. The one exception was a young woman named Keena Aisaican-Checkosis who chose to play her beatmaking set live using MPC and Ableton Live. Keena has since continued on to become an exceptional IMP Labs' assistant and workshop facilitator, as well as a role model for other young women at the high school.

Over the course of project implementation with the first and second cohorts, it became obvious that the majority of students simply did not have the body awareness, strength, flexibility, and stamina to participate in the breakdance element of the program. In response, an additional emphasis on health and wellness was included in the third project through the development of a community partnership with the gym Flux CrossFit (see Flux Regina) that focuses on weightlifting, gymnastics, powerlifting, kettlebells, mobility, and a paleo-primal approach to eating. Along with the conventional hip hop arts practices, the students were also taught that "to be a successful breakdancer one needs kinesthetic awareness (or self-awareness of the body in time and space), the courage to perform choreographed and improvised dance movements, *and* a strong dose of creativity" (Marsh, 2010, p. 16).

At Flux, head coach and researcher, Darci Anderson, taught health and wellbeing through the adoption of an ancestral diet, as well as an emphasis on the ten recognized elements of fitness: strength, power, stamina, agility, speed, balance, coordination, accuracy, flexibility, and cardio respiratory endurance. Darci encouraged the students to consider the relationship between arts, athleticism, and health outside the more conventional athletics and

nutritional frameworks, and she inspired the students (and their teachers) to become more active and aware of nutrition in their everyday. The students explained the kinds of moves they wanted to be able to perform, and she in turn showed them how to train their bodies so that the moves would be within reach. This strength, conditioning, and mobility work translated into the most heavily dance influenced performances of all the projects.

The third cohort's project also entailed going into the recording studio for the first time, the outcome of which was a CD containing works by the students, as well as a bonus track by Saskatchewan rapper Def3.[6] The students enjoyed the overall studio experience; the process of recording on separate tracks, being able to re-record sections over and over again, the difference in the space and the separation between the studio and the booth, as well as contributing in a new way to the overall project were all particularly rewarding for the students. The recording studio, which is part of the New Media Studies Laboratory at the University of Regina, added a level of professionalism to the students' hip hop experience, validating their contributions as even more "legitimate" within the context of both high school learning and the real world.

Working on mixing Rounddance and Rap

Photo credits Marsh/IMP Labs

As a model of learning, project and experienced-based approaches have been essential to the overall success of both the participating students and the Hip Hop Project itself. More conventional skills are emphasized throughout the project, including writing, reading, interpreting, presenting, but more importantly, these are learned within a framework of arts, culture, and interactive media. Further, the students develop a host of new skills through the use of complex old and new technologies.

"Keepin' it real": Community impact

Initially the hip hop projects were understood by communities, teachers, principals, and researchers through a lens of "intervention"; that is, hip hop programming designed to *react to* perceived problems (e.g., failing grades, absenteeism, lack of engagement with curriculum, keeping youth out of trouble, rehabilitating "bad" kids, et cetera). From an instrumentalist and quantitative (or statistical) perspective, the Hip Hop Project has proven successful in addressing some of these issues. Yet, within only a few short weeks into the first project, it became clear that this was insufficient to explain the impact of the program on students. Indeed, the young people were "acting" not "reacting."

Through hip hop, its associated arts practices and culture, these young people were expressing everything from the typical high school themes of love, loss, success, and desire, to the more complex ideas of what it means to be an Indigenous urban

youth living in North Central (understood as Regina's "hood") today. For the students, hip hop was no longer just a theme; rather, it became a way

> to express and make sense of present-day lived experiences including the ongoing legacies of state enforced residential school programs and other practices of colonization, the current climate of contentious government initiated truth and reconciliation processes, and systemic issues of racism, poverty, and violence faced by young Indigenous people today." (Marsh, 2009a, 129)[7]

From the perspective of the students' teachers, principals, and other community officials, the Hip Hop Project has helped to regulate students' attendance and enthusiasm for the curriculum, in some cases grades have risen, and more students have completed their education requirements. Perhaps the most promising and exciting impact is that, by spending time learning and creating in the IMP Labs at the University, we now hear

IMP Labs: Beat-Making Studio Ryan Anaskan (HHP v.1) now a university student at First Nations University of Canada mentoring Rebecca Strongeagle (HHP v.3)

Photo credit: Marsh/IMP Labs

almost all participating students expressing interest in post-secondary education (college, university, art school, trades school, and technical schools). For these students, the Project has sparked a curiosity about university and possible university programs. Working in a university context in the IMP Labs has broadened many students' perception of university to the extent that they now understand that hip hop could be part of a university or college education, and, more importantly, that they are themselves already part of the university community through the Hip Hop Project. Following the success of the Hip Hop Project and their contributions to the program, these students now are able to view themselves as potential university students. They have made an important

connection to, and created a space for, themselves in an environment that can often be isolating, intimidating, and inaccessible for Aboriginal youth (Timmons, Doyle-Bedwell, & Lewey, 2009).

This aspect of the Hip Hop Project should not be underestimated. As students transition from high school to the University of Regina and First Nations University of Canada, former Project participants come to the IMP Labs, not the Center for Aboriginal Students or Student Services, as the first place to connect with and begin their university experience.

It is significant that through the Hip Hop Project, the participants are engaging in a dialogue about the world around them, and where they see themselves fitting in or not fitting in. Through their raps, beats, graffiti, and dance, the students are telling stories—to each other, to their peers, to their families, and to their communities—about how they understand their own politics, acts of resistance and compliance, fears, anxieties, dreams, celebrations, identity, and culture.[8] In doing so they are investing in a global hip

Aaron and Chas Emceeing at the Community Performance (HHPv.3)

Sam on the decks in the IMP Labs DJ Studio

Photo credits: Marsh/IMP Labs

hop dialogue that encourages youth expression and activism in spite of media representations of capitalist narratives of excess, hyper-masculinity, and hegemonic norms. Addressing these issues, along with so many other complexities and contradictions, becomes just one more layer of the Project.

The Hip Hop Project has provided the students with a framework within which to build relationships with each other, to develop community, and to represent and expand this community together. No longer seeing themselves as only one among many in a crowd, students in the Hip Hop Project are developing alternative identities, rooted in a culture they are making themselves.

"It's tricky, tricky, tricky, tricky": Community research and ethical relations

When I arrived at the University of Regina in 2004, I was at the end of writing my dissertation on rave culture in Toronto—a primarily Euro-centric, bourgeois cultural practice that had just experienced an intensive period of censorship and regulation—by governing officials, health and safety committees, and the ravers themselves (Marsh, 2006). The dramatic shift in my research focus from rave culture to hip hop was not planned. Nor did I have any idea how community-oriented and creation based my re-

search approach, methods, theoretical frameworks, and analyses would become when I proposed my CRC research program in 2007. The Hip Hop Project has challenged the IMP Labs team to re-think both the purpose of community-based research and the ethical relations that are an integral part of research involving collaboration with young people and community partners. This project also challenges how research is read and valued within the academy, calling into question what the academy views as appropriate and its recognized modes of knowledge translation.

The IMP Labs continue to facilitate and help sustain hip hop programming in urban, rural and isolated northern environments, the IMP Labs' community hours program, the Flatland Scratch Seminar and Workshop Series, as well as through on-line support and consultation. As a researcher, a community member, and a hip hop enthusiast, these are some of the ways that I am able to reciprocate the generosity, inspiration, and courage represented when collaborating with young people and their communities.

Notes

1. For these research questions, along with a summary of my initial CRC research program, see the Interactive Media and Performance website.

2. For information on the hip hop projects, see the Interactive Media and Performance website, "News and Events."

3. Scott Collegiate is the only high school in Regina's infamous North Central neighborhood. For a critical discussion of the 2007 *Maclean's* article naming North Central as one of Canada's worst neighborhoods in Canada see Marsh (2011).

4. For more information on the IMP Labs and the IMP Labs' studios, see Interactive Media and Performance under "IMP Labs."

5. To view these performances, see Interactive Media and Performance and click on "IMP Labs Input/Output" then "Productions."

6. To hear tracks from this production, see Interactive Media and Performance and click on the media player.

7. The following are specific examples presented in the students' raps from each of the projects: in the first cohort, one young man wrote and performed two raps in response to Harper's apology around the residential schools and the ongoing impacts on him as a 17-year old; in the second cohort, another student wrote about the violent death of his best friend; in the third cohort, a young woman wrote and performed a rap discussing her relationship to her mother and the impact her father's abandonment had on the family; and in the fourth cohort, a young woman wrote and performed a rap about home and how it was a lonely, violent place, while simultaneously a place of safety from the outside world.

8. To watch a short video on the storytelling aspect of the Scott Collegiate/IMP Labs Hip Hop Project, see Innovation Canada.

Websites

Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture. http://www.beatnation.org
Blue Print For Life. http://www.blueprintforlife.ca
Flux Regina. www.FluxCrossFit.ca
ICTM World Conference 2011. http://www.mun.ca/ictm2011/conference.htm
Innovation Canada. http://www.innovationcanada.ca/en/articles/hip-hop-storytellers
Interactive Media and Performance. http://www.interactivemediaandperformance.com
Raincity Rap. http://raincityrap.eventbrite.com

Scott Collegiate Hip Hop Project. http://scott-hhp.blogspot.com
Soundshift: A time for international music and dance. http://www.mun.ca/ictm2011/festival.htm
Streetz FM. http://streetzfm.ca

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