Profile of the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs: An Interview with Dr. Charity Marsh

Interviewed by Rebecca Caines

Dr. Marsh is the Canada Research Chair in Interactive Media and Popular Music in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Regina. Marsh's Interactive Media and Performance Labs are internationally renowned research and creative practice spaces that house research facilities, MPC music stations, and a fully equipped DJ Pod. The Labs are located in the basement of the Riddell Centre at the University of Regina. They are used by local and visiting artists, communities, students, researchers, and faculty, with weekly time set aside for supported, open access to the equipment for anyone who wishes to come and visit.

Rebecca Caines: Why did you start the IMP Labs?

Charity Marsh: In 2006, I had to write a Canada Research Chair five-year research program. One of the key elements to the kinds of research that I do, especially around community-based research working with Indigenous youth in Indigenous communities, is looking at local Saskatchewan communities and what happens here, what's relevant at this specific time. A really critical part of that CRC research program was the development of these IMP Labs. Initially, I could say from a very practical point of view, the IMP Labs were supposed to be a hub, a space for creative work, for ongoing research, for networking, and importantly, it was for supporting the development of the research that was going to be under that Canada Research Chair.

Initially, I had participated in some really great work happening at other places, and I was thinking about things that worked there. I did a number of courses at the DJ Academy of Scratch in New York. I also went to the Scratch Labs in Toronto, these "for-profit" kinds of places. I was thinking specifically about hip-hop, because when I came to Saskatchewan, I was asked by so many different people, so many different members of the community (whether they were institutional representatives or community members), about what was happening with hip-hop. In particular, they wanted to know why are Indigenous youth drawn to hip-hop culture?

I came out of a background of looking at other forms of popular music, in particular electronic dance music, rave culture. That was a major shift for me in my research, and a major shift in the way I started to think about research in relation to place and space. Of course, it also related to the ethics and the politics of being an outsider in Saskatchewan.

Another element that I think is really important, and that I wrote into all of the grant applications, is that the IMP Labs needed to be accessible to the public. I am really uncomfortable with the research spaces that are tied to particular parameters around users—research spaces that could be open to the community. I am uncomfortable with the idea that here is a publicly funded research space, and it's this awesome place with lots of cool, expensive technology, and yet the only people that are allowed to use it are the researchers or the students of the researchers, or people that are connected to the institution. And at that time (this is eight years ago), that kind of thinking was very much part of the language tied to grant structures. Here are these incredible opportunities, I think, to actually connect research institutions to the larger, surrounding communities. This led me to write community engagement directly into the grant applications, so these Labs would be a community-based research centre, and the community could have access—and not tied only to conventional notions of research and research projects.

Now that doesn't mean I don't talk about the IMP Labs' community hours program as research at times in conventional research discourse: I don't divorce the Labs' programs from the kinds of "research" that I do, and the research questions that I ask. But it was really important to me, and a challenge, to write the research and infrastructure grants to match the vision of what I saw for these Labs. It was also fairly unique at the time. Community engagement in heavily technologized research labs has become more common now: people are doing that much more often. I always thought it was so weird—these strange rules around grants!

RC: What were some of the highlights of the IMP Labs over the years for you?

CM: I think the IMP Labs' community hours program is a highlight. The IMP Labs are open three or four days a week in the evenings, and people from the community can come—and they do. There are people in the Labs to facilitate knowledge in the creative arts and with the creative technologies. People can come and play, and for me this kind of thinking goes back to being childlike. As adults, as we mature and grow, we are so often dissuaded from playing, and I think the IMP Labs really open up a lot of space for adults to play, and for young people as well, and it gives the community access to the kinds of technologies that

perhaps they would not be able to work with otherwise. The Labs also open up networks to artists that I hire to work there, or that come in to be there, to create, to play, to work together, and to collaborate. So that's one of the big highlights.

Another important aspect of the Labs has been the Scott Collegiate IMP/ Labs' Hip-Hop Projects. I have done a lot of these projects over the last seven years with Scott Collegiate High School, located in the area of North Central here in Regina. One of the teachers at this school saw the launch of the Labs in the media and they called me. It was because of some, very cool, creative, and dedicated hard work of one of the teachers, Chris Beingessner. He is now there as Vice-Principal. We collaborated on setting up this project. The project was a way for young people to complete Arts Education and English credits. We were coming at it through the theme of hip-hop. And the project has taken many different shapes over the years and evolved in different ways, but it always, at the core, is about bringing young people, generally often marginalized young people, into the university from that school via hip-hop. Scott Collegiate tends to have a very high percentage of Indigenous youth. Lots of students there face systemic poverty and lots of other kinds of difficult challenges. At the time, the staff at the school were seeing a lot of the young men not getting past Grade Ten, and dropping out of school, and so this was another way for us to think about encouraging and keeping young people to stay in school and working towards graduation, specifically the young men. We proposed the question: is there a way to think about these issues through hip-hop? The answer became evident from the first run of the project.

A major part of those projects was bringing young people here to the Labs at the university, teaching them all the major primary elements of hip-hop, whether it was DJing, beat making, graffiti arts, or break dancing, I would hire local artists and some international or national artists to come work with the IMP Labs' team. What would happen was that the young people would work towards putting on an entire show of their own hip-hop at the end of the project. They would complete assignments all the way through, but it would always end with a big community performance and the performance for the feeder schools, and the community performance would happen out in the community. Our first project performance was a community partnership for a series called Thursday Night Live at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, and we had over 300 people show up—and here these young people were! It was all their work: it was their beats, their rhymes, their dance routines put together—their art. For that show, I hired Def3 to come, and he also performed with them and he facilitated workshops with them. Other artists such as Eekwol, Merky Waters, InfoRed have also been involved in the projects. I even brought up Mystik out of LA. So there have been a lot of really interesting and thoughtful people that have come and participated. Generally what we have seen as a result is young people throughout the project getting their high school credits.

I've also seen a lot of interesting and problematic things around the gendering of technologies, creative technologies. For example, you have the young man really being drawn to performance, on the mic or dancing; and then you have a lot of women being drawn to creating beats, finessing the beats, finishing the beats, and even to the tables, to the decks. So it's very interesting to see that kind of gendering of technology: it really highlights some of the ongoing social issues around technologies, especially creative technologies, and how young people are socialized. But in general, Scott Collegiate has been a very big, very important project that's challenged me to think about other kinds of comnnunity-based research projects and issues of access and sustainability. The IMP Labs' team and I also go and tour the North and Northern Communities with hip-hop projects, but then we also find ourselves asking: how can we continue to help sustain projects rather than just being drop-ins? "Hey look at this cool gear. Hey I'm gonna show it to you, let you play with it, and then take it away from you." So to address this concern, we attempt to help mentor people around purchasing gear and equipment for friendship centres, youth programs, and offering ongoing support whether it's via Skype or going back into communities.

RC: I am wondering how the IMP Labs work with improvisation practices?

CM: For me, hip-hop is all about improvisation, whether you are writing rhymes, whether you're making beats, whether DJing, break dancing, doing graffiti arts, beat boxing, even creating particular kinds of fashion, or responding to hip-hop. There are so many different ways of improvising that come out, quite naturally, in this culture that is full of so many artistic forms and creative practices in it.

I think one of the reasons why we see hip-hop developing as a global way of resisting and thinking about strategies of resistance around the world for young people is that there are so many possible entry points, or so many ways people can become involved, without having necessarily to have years and years and years of experience of particular kinds of practices. Not that I am saying people haven't spent time honing their skills. Of course, there are artists where this is their livelihood, this is their life, they do this all the time—but there are a lot of possibilities for the non-professional to get involved. It is very easy for us to do an intro to a MPC, or a beat making workshop, with people who have really very little or no musical training, and get them to create a two-bar loop, a beat, in forty-five minutes, even showing them how to think about sounds and samples and put sounds together: "OK, here is what I would start with: I started the

bass, I started with this, I want to maybe have a little bit of this in here." And these kinds of practices lead to improvisation in ways that are accessible and not as scary, because of course putting yourself out there is very scary.

I remember this as a musician playing my saxophone, and I really came out of Dixieland, and that kind of blues style of jazz, and it was always very scary to be like: "OK, well here is your sixteen bars, you get to improvise your solo." And I remember always feeling this kind of trepidation around it. So when I think about improvisation, initially I have to try to not think about it in that kind of a way, that kind of nervousness, anxiety, and having to perform and, do these kinds of things publically all the time. And yet here when you sit down with someone, and they start to just play around with sounds and even just think, "OK, what sound do I like," and then they start to respond, "OK, I'm gonna put this sound, I like it, it works really well with this sound, no these sounds don't work well at all." There is already a sense that they are starting to improvise in a kind of amateurish way, but a way that leads them to something more. Same on the decks, as we see when young people try to create even a thirty-second scratch piece. The other thing that works really well with improvisation is that they really start to know the music. So you listen, and you listen, and you listen: you listen to how things fit together, you listen to how other people put things together, and then it's really your own imagination and creativity—that *you* are able to start putting things together that others don't hear, or things that fit very well and are very typical, and they have a particular kind of feel or sound.

Same with the dance forms. Obviously one of the things that we see in the cipher is that I'm responding to the person that has gone before me and, well, I don't have that routine planned; maybe sometimes I worked on a routine and there are certain moves that I know I'm good at, but I don't do the same thing all the time or else I'm boring! So for me, hip-hop is such an incredible art form because it's all about improvisation and it's about responding to others, even if it's not to other artists, but it is in to audience members, or a group of people. That is the kind of improvisation practices we see happening all the time in the Labs.

Just a couple of weeks ago Skratch Bastid was here, performing at The Owl (student pub), and he came into the IMP Labs, and he and one of my Research Assistants, Merky Waters (Chris Merk), they were going back-and-forth, scratching back-and-forth with each other and just improvising, and enjoying each other's music. They were comparing and listening and trying to, I suppose, have a conversation with each other through their music, through their styles. So that for me is where you see improvisation explicitly. You especially see people that don't have a lot of musical background not being afraid to improvise: they want to play. I mean that's play—it is really so much a part of that. I mean from childhood, your creativity, you are always improvising through your play.

I do a lot of workshops with adults. Often the IMP Labs are used in recruitment, with special guests at the university. These are often stakeholders, and these are people that generally grew up being told, "You don't touch the record; carefully put the needle on; move away gently." For a lot of these folks, it's really hard for me to convince them, "I want you to put your hands on the vinyl: I want you to make that scratch noise that was so taboo." In these instances, it is about reminding these people about play, but also breaking down some of those familiar kinds of social practices or attitudes around technology. That has been something that that I find amusing. It's good to get folks working through discomfort of the familiar and pushing them towards a new feeling of childlike awe.

RC: You have already started answering my next question, which was about the tie between those improvisation practices and the social outcomes that you are looking for. You have talked a little bit here about "access" already—and that is huge—and the sense of connection between people that also seems like a very important social outcome of the work you are doing. Are there other ways that improvisation feeds into the kinds of social outcomes that you are looking for? Does it have a connection to themes you have talked about previously in your research: the expression of stories, the connections to local social issues, those kinds of things?

CM: Well certainly, we have seen that in a lot of the projects, even in the Scott Collegiate/IMP Labs' Hip-Hop Projects. What has ended up happening (and I certainly didn't see this at the outset), over and over again we have seen, how through this kind of play, through these kinds of improvisation and improvisatory practices, young people are finding a way to articulate very complex ideas about the social, cultural, and political environment in which they live. For example, in one of the first projects, I had a young man who didn't speak very much at all throughout the project. He would write a lot in his journal and write a lot of rhymes, and he would share those with me—but not the class. But he also wanted to rap. He chose to rap in the performance, which I was very surprised about because he was so shy and quiet. And yet, his rap was about him as a seventeen year-old man, living in the "hood" in Regina, and what this life meant to him. His rap was also about the response to Harper's apology that had just happened six or seven months previously, in the summer, around the atrocities of the residential schools.

And so here is a young man that is articulating very complex ideas about experience, his experience as an urban kid. His entire life has been affected by the residential school crises, colonialism, and he is rapping about what it means to think about Indigeneity, contemporary experiences of Indigeneity, and Indigenous identity: how young people are being taught and told to be Indigenous; what it means to be a good citizen as a young person; and all the various different tensions and celebrations and crises that go along with these issues today. This performance was a very critical and innovative response to a complex lived experience. The performance was a place for him to articulate these ideas in a way that he felt was, well he wouldn't say this, but I'm saying it: "productive". The performance was a public and creative place to speak out, which he probably would not have done in other sorts of more conventional pedagogical environments, in subjects like high school English for example.

The stories that come out in these projects are not just stories told through language, but stories told through other kinds of artistic practices, whether it's beats, whether it's dance, through their graffiti drawings, etc. I'm seeing a lot of young people being able to articulate these complex ideas. I mean it's not like they are asked, "Write these raps on these things." It is more like, here in this project you get to write raps on whatever *you* choose, what makes sense to you. Of course we get raps on love, and dating, and despair, and all those kinds of usual teenage things, but also on experiences that are not as "typical": for example, what it means for a young person who is trying to participate in school, but is at the same time the caregiver for three or four of her younger siblings?

The complication of this work, however, is: What does it mean for young people to be drawn to these kinds of artistic practices, to talk about colonialism and indigeneity in Canada at this point? How is it, through very particular discourses, these young people are being told what it means to be Indigenous? Not necessarily by Elders in their communities, but by the media, by health officials, by a discourse on multiculturalism that's coming very much from the government. How did they take all these things in? Yet, often, this is not their experience at all. Their experiences are very much tied to their local place, to the kinds of things that are happening there; they don't necessarily match. Yet here they are coming up with their own articulations of identity, nation-hood, culture that are meaningful to them.

RC: I was just wondering if you think there's anything specific to hip-hop improvisation that allows young people to connect to a global and a local sense of community?

CM: It is because there are so many entry points, because of its access, because of a very romanticized history, the mythic origins are tied to the reclamation space and place and the empowerment of disenfranchised communities. Hip-hop is a unique politics, a unique movement, that young people from around the world can easily grab on to in order to empower themselves, to empower their communities. We see it over and over again. There are the stages. One: there's the mimicry first; you see these American idioms being mimicked: "I want to be 2Pac," "I want to be Biggie Smalls," "I want to sound like Nas." So you have this mimicry, but then what happens is that there is a shift. Within communities all around the world you see this shift: we see people understanding, appropriating, adopting, and adapting hip-hop practices to include local experience, local idioms, languages, movements, practices, identity, identifiers. It is through those kinds of processes, these larger processes, where you start to see these kinds of improvisations happening. It is here that politics shift, I think, from mimicry to the local, but then from local connecting to the global. And that kind of hip-hop politics on the global level is what we see a lot in Canada, but it happens around the world and it is very important. Then you begin to see and recognize young people connecting to other kinds of histories and struggles. In thinking about their own experience or the experience of their particular community or their particular struggle, they begin to see it in relation to other kinds of communities around the world, and that's very innovative thinking for young people.

Of course, it's all mediated through global technologies; it's mediated through the music industry, and these ongoing issues that arise. Hip-hop is very problematic and is filled with contradictions. We can't just glorify hip-hop as a politics of resistance, but we can't ignore it, because it has become such an important strategy around the world. Yes, it still has its major faults—issues of gender, issues of excess, insider/outsider issues—but there are still lots of possibilities. And we've also seen young people get very creative and articulate through these kinds of issues to create new forms of culture, which are brilliant. So you do really get tied into those contradictions as well.

Hip-hop is, or can be, this great, useful tool for empowerment, self-empowerment, community empowerment, giving people a voice, telling stories. Yet at the same time, it continues to be really racialized and mapped onto Othered bodies by political, health, media, and all kinds of other institutions. We get into these funny situations where it is celebrated and also policed in very particular kinds of ways, and that friction, that tension, is something that I am working through and trying to understand in relation to Indigenous hip-hop here in Canada.

I am also interested in asking: What is it about hip-hop, still? What is it about the way that young people are drawn to hip-hop, and are using hip-hop, that is *so* frightening to people and institutional authorities? What is it about these art practices, this culture, that results in so much surveillance? Why is it that it is still policed in so many ways, that it is used to both celebrate and also to subjugate these young people, these youthful bodies, these "othered" bodies?

RC: Given that there has been so much critique of hip-hop, as well as celebration of it, where do you see your lab can go in the future, and how can you respond to some of these issues, and to Saskatchewan as it changes over the next few years?

CM: Well, I think the IMP Labs have become a place that is recognized by the people who use it as a place where they can come, where they can do what they want to do, which they can't do in other places. It is certainly a place of empowerment: I have seen people who have done workshops, or been in the hip-hop projects with me, and then the lab becomes their first point of contact when they come to university. So I see that as important. I've always committed to any of the young people that I work with in those projects that if they come to university, I will hire them as research assistants at the Labs: one way I feel I can give back to the communities within which I work, and to continue to support and sustain those kinds of initiatives and creative practices. And this also helps me to think about my own implicated position in institutionalizing hip-hop.

The one thing I would like to see with the IMP Labs, I mean there is always ebb and flow, but I would really love to see the university support an initiative to have the Labs be more known within Saskatchewan communities, and not only as a recruitment strategy. I think with the university's new Creative Technologies program there is room for the IMP Labs to grow as a way to connect both with our own communities, but also across the nation, so that we can network not just in research and university communities, but with other communities—locals connecting with other locals. I also see a lot of local artists coming together and collaborating. As the IMP Labs have grown, I have applied to build more resources: I just received another Canada Innovation Grant last year for the Labs. The IMP Labs are becoming bigger: a new Mobile Music Lab is now part of the IMP Labs, and also a Centre for Indigenous Community Research in Hip-Hop. So as the Labs grow and they evolve, what I would like to see more, and this has already started, are these connections between people, various different stakeholders: for us to move toward not just so much the local, but making more regional connections. We should really be connecting in solid ways to Manitoba, to Alberta--and then nationally, and then looking at international connections where young people are doing distinct things, but the distinctions are related through the kinds of experiences and stories where they can easily identify with each other. This is my next goal with the IMP Labs as a research centre.

RC: I hope we see lots of exciting things coming out in the next few years. I am really excited about the connection with IMP Labs and the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation site at the University of Regina. I feel like that connection has the potential to help keep disseminating the work that is coming out of the IMP Labs and to make those connections between little pockets of work that are happening all over the country and internationally. I believe we will continue to see those connections you draw between improvisation as a creative practice and its role as an important social practice. Thank you so much for envisioning and guiding this important hip-hop hub in the Prairies.