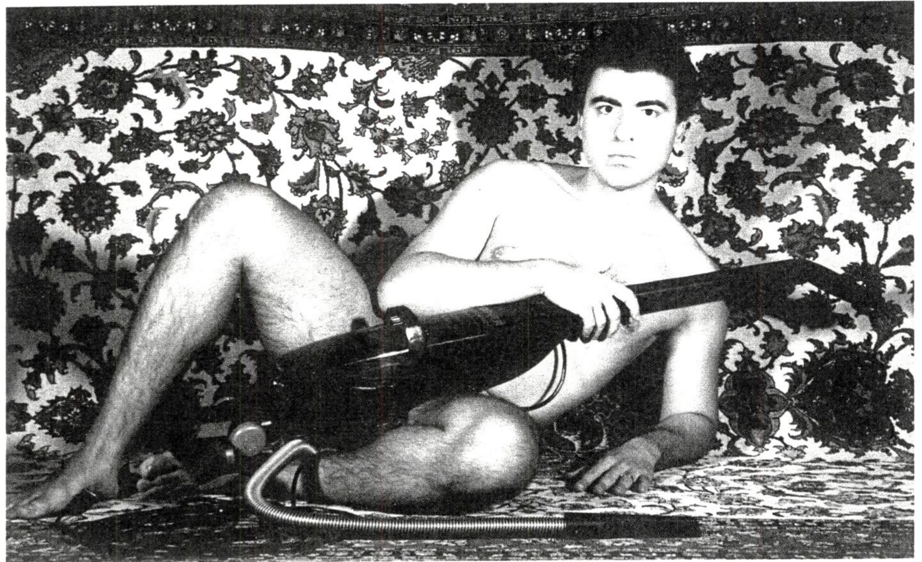
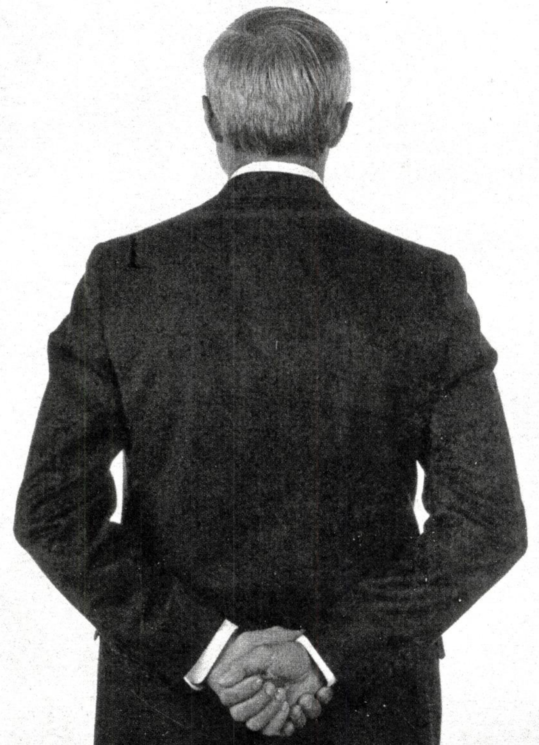


MAKING IT LIKE A MAN

Canadian Masculinities in Practice



MAKING IT LIKE A MAN

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CHAPTER 8

"Keepin' It Real"? Masculinity, Indigeneity, and Media Representations of Gangsta Rap in Regina

CHARITY MARSH

The police organize us. We're all Aboriginal and they all stick us in one place.

—ROBIN FAVEL, A.K.A. BURDEN

The city of Regina, Saskatchewan, is burdened with a highly contentious reputation as one of Canada's most violent and socially impoverished cities. This reputation is mapped onto the neighbourhoods known as "North Central" and the downtown "Core" through a discourse of both "true" accounts and sensationalized racist and gendered narratives offered up by a multitude of media sources. That discourse is then often reproduced by minoritized, marginalized, and disenfranchised young people, who adopt cultural signifiers, tropes, and practices associated with mythologized gang lifestyles as represented in mainstream hip-hop and gangsta rap cultures. For many Aboriginal youth in these neighbourhoods, participating in gangsta life represents a reclamation of (urban) territory, the creation of community or "family," a sense of belonging, safety from rival gangs, the accumulation of social status within the 'hood, and a means to cope with systemic issues linked to poverty and racism. But involvement in gang culture also means a life filled with violence and crime, higher potential for early death, and an internalized hierarchy of social status that mimics the patriarchal and racist structures of the colonialist society—structures that bind these neighbourhoods to their current social conditions.

Within hip-hop culture—and specifically in rap music—there is an emphasis on the relationship between place and meaning. This emphasis speaks to why and how rap music is created, as well as to why, in the global

realm, the meanings associated with the genre are easily recognized and transferable.[1] Whether the city is a large metropolis like New York or a small city encoded with a rural sensibility like Regina, hip hop is an urban music culture with intimate ties to the city and especially to the racialized spaces of its inner city neighbourhoods.[2] In his work on hip-hop culture in America, media theorist Murray Forman (2004) argues that the city is audible in rap music: "Rap music takes the city and its multiple spaces as the foundation of its cultural production. In the music and lyrics, the city is an audible presence, explicitly cited and digitally sampled" (203). One outcome of these close connections is the transference of the sounds associated with one city or neighbourhood to another through the marketing and consumption of rap music and hip-hop culture. In his comparison of rap in two European cities, Andy Bennett (2004) argues that "hip hop is culturally mobile. Hip hop culture and its attendant notions of authenticity are constantly being 'remade' as hip hop is appropriated by different groups of young people in cities and regions around the world" (177). The globalization of rap music offers the potential for one cityscape to appropriate and adapt another, as well as possibilities for shared identifications among local residents.

In the case of Regina gangsta rapper Robin Favel (a.k.a. Burden), the typical American gangsta rapper archetype *and* his own experiences of living in Regina's notorious 'hood play a significant role in his practice as an artist and as an Aboriginal man living in North Central. Favel, who performs many of the stereotypes associated with gangsta rapper culture—fashion, vernacular, gesture, rituals—embodies the particular crisis that is North Central and, more generally, Regina. Following a standoff between Favel and the police in North Central on 17 August 2007, documentary filmmaker Cory Generoux told journalists that "Robin is the personification of [North Central]."[3] In Favel's rap music, Regina's 'hood, and one of its narratives—the rise in Aboriginal gang culture in Canada—can be heard alongside (and integrated within) the audible sounds of gangsta life as portrayed in American hip-hop culture (i.e., regional or turf rivalries, depictions of class struggle, run-ins with the law, the possession or coveting of "bling," attitudes of sexism, and "family" loyalty). For Favel, and for media sources that represent him and his 'hood, the genre of rap—more specifically, gangsta rap—provides a framework, an almost cookie-cutter approach to a complicated narrative that is both colonialist and minoritizing.

In this chapter I build on Forman's argument (2002, 2004)—that the city shapes rap music and is the foundation of its cultural production—as an approach to discussing how gangsta rap in Regina, specifically gangsta rapper Robin Favel (a.k.a. Burden), and Regina's 'hoods are represented in the media and in the community. Integral to this analysis is an understanding of how masculinity and indigeneity are signified and mapped onto these places, onto the bodies that inhabit them, and onto the cultural practices attributed to them by the media. An examination of Christine's Ramsay's work on APTN's series *Moccasin Flats* and its adaptation of the themes and styles of the American 'hood film genre will make even clearer the impact of American archetypes on the neighbourhood at hand. Worth noting here is Ramsay's compelling argument that *Moccasin Flats* gives "a distinct voice to the particularities of the urban experiences of Regina's aboriginal youth" (2010, 4). As a way to think about these particularities as alternative narratives that may be (or have been) employed by community members in order to deconstruct problematic stereotypes and misrepresentations, I draw on Paul Gilroy's critique of how the family trope is encoded in hip-hop culture as well as Taiaiake Alfred's concept of what it means to be a contemporary indigenous warrior. This research is also shaped by the following questions: How do stereotypical performances of gangsta rapper masculinity impact a community like North Central? Why are there no stories of women in relation to the gangsta figure other than the narratives of women as reproducers of culture (mothers) or as symbols of wealth (prostitutes/girlfriends/"bling")? How do media representations of hip-hop culture, and its *seemingly* natural associations with gang culture, reproduce and glorify rather than challenge conventional definitions of race and masculinity? What is the relationship between contemporary colonialism in Canada and the adaptation of gangsta rap culture by Aboriginal men, such as Robin Favel, who live in North Central? Using these questions as starting points for further discussion, my aim is to make sense of the continuing impacts of colonialism as manifested in Regina's gangsta rap culture, and of the ongoing violence inherent in the forging of a nation immersed in capitalism.

THE HIP-HOP GANGSTA: FIGURE OF FOLKLORE

> Laying claim to the gangsta persona is a favorite theme in hip hop.[4]

In hip-hop folklore the gangsta figure represents the hero and the villain; more often than not, he is a tragic masculine figure.[5] As reproduced for mass consumption by the music, film, television, and news industries, the American hip-hop gangsta lifestyle offers a particular fantasy of hypermasculinity based on the accumulation of wealth, power, prestige, sex, and respect born of intimidation and fear. Because of its ties to power, wealth, and a discourse of authenticity, "laying claim to the gangsta persona is a favorite theme in hip hop" (Kelly 2004, 95). The hip-hop gangsta figure represents an alternative to the familiar narrative of colonized male bodies by repositioning a marked, racialized body as a site of privilege and power produced through capitalist gains. Power is assumed to come from "owning" the street, and the gangsta

identity is generated by practices of naming and claiming that are ever present in hip-hop culture. To appear more gangsta and more ghetto lends credibility to one's identity as an authentic gangsta hip-hop artist.[6]

In spite of hip hop's idealistic origin myth—a commitment to politically conscious lyrics, reclamation of public spaces, and a significant connection to community through creative arts practices—hip-hop culture symbolizes a mythology of masculinity in which there persist archaic gendering principles based on patriarchal norms. These principles are reproduced through discourses of sexism and misogyny, as well as other strategies of exclusion and violence (e.g., colonialism).[7] "As sexism and misogyny are largely extensions of normative patriarchal privilege, their reproduction in the music of male hip-hop artists speaks more powerfully to the extent that these young men… are invested in that privilege" (Neal 2000, 247). And though Neal goes on to suggest that these artists are not solely responsible for reproducing that privilege, the argument needs to be made that these artists are responsible for their actions and behaviours as well as for the conventional narratives of oppression that they consistently adopt and reproduce. Those artists who attempt to challenge or disrupt such archetypes are pushed to the outside, where their voices, attitudes, and exceptionalism can easily be ignored or are less threatening to the status quo.

This investment in patriarchal privilege is perpetuated in media representations of the gangsta hip-hop lifestyle as well as among those who participate in gangsta hip-hop culture. The outcome is a masculinity that is meaningful only in relation to a subservient feminized other, a "bros before hoes" attitude, and to the trope of the hetero-normative family in which women are relegated to the role of reproduction. Within hip-hop culture, ideals of authenticity are perpetuated through conventions such as the family. In his criticism of how the family trope is adopted in hip-hop culture, Gilroy (2004) argues: "The family is the approved, natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced. In this authoritarian pastoral patriarchy, women are identified as the agents and means of this reproductive process" (89). This trope is also an important strategy in many Aboriginal cultures in Canada: women are viewed as reproducers of culture but are trapped in a patriarchal family system that continues to oppress and marginalize them.

For Gilroy the quest for authenticity in hip hop is riddled with highly problematic and essentialist associations: "Those definitions of authenticity are disproportionately defined by ideas about nurturance, about family, about fixed gender roles, and generational responsibilities. What is authentic is also frequently defined by ideas about sexuality and patterns of interaction between men and women that are taken to be expressive of essential, that is, racial, difference" (89).

The mapping of these essential differences in relation to the family trope is also relevant in contemporary Aboriginal culture so that "for many, idealization of nurturing/motherhood has been reified and has gained political currency within nationalist and cultural difference discourses" (LaRocque 2007, 55). For Aboriginal women generally, this too has resulted in their being relegated to role of reproducers of culture in a context of patriarchal and colonial oppression. Political theorist Joyce Green (2007) explains: "Contemporary Aboriginal women are subjected to patriarchal and colonial oppression within settler society and, in some contexts, in Aboriginal communities. Some Aboriginal cultures and communities are patriarchal, either in cultural origin or because of incorporation of colonizer patriarchy" (22).

The concept of authenticity has become deeply embedded in the discourses of nationalism and cultural difference, so much so that "this authenticity is inseparable from talk about the conduct and management of bitter gender-based conflicts, which is now recognized as essential to familial, racial, and communal health" (Gilroy 2004, 89). In other words, the argument presented around remaining healthy as a cultural community has become entrenched in highly problematic and essentialist notions of cultural authenticity, which actually perpetuate rather than disrupt power relations and the status quo.

In her work on indigenous feminisms, Green (2007) warns that

> rejecting the rhetoric and institutions of the colonizer by embracing the symbols of one's culture and traditions is a strategy for reclaiming the primacy of one's own context in the worlds, against the imposition of colonialism. But, in the absence of an analysis of the power relations embedded in tradition, it is not necessarily a libratory [*sic*] strategy. Each choice must be interrogated on its own merits, relative to the objective of a contemporary emancipatory formulation that will benefit Aboriginal men, women and children. (27)

Consequently, how authenticity is understood in relation to gangsta rap culture created in North Central, for example, is deeply embedded in contemporary systems of patriarchy and colonialism—systems that determine how masculinities and femininities are performed and read.[8] Moreover, because "hip-hop's grip on American [and arguably North American] youth allows for the circulation of sexist and misogynistic narratives in a decidedly uncritical fashion" (Neal 2004, 247), it is critical to analyze how these narratives are understood, re-enacted, and mediated, as well as how they are mapped onto other locales and nations where hip hop has traversed borders and been appropriated (and adapted).[9]

For young Aboriginal men participating in gang culture in Regina, however, the form of masculinity conventionally associated with hip hop, no matter how problematic, implies a "new" status that works against the signifiers associated with a lack of power or emasculation. It is a masculinity

inextricably linked to capitalism. One only has to turn to the first issue of *Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan* (Winter 2005), which states that "in Saskatchewan, the 'gangster' lifestyle is an attractive alternative for many aboriginal youth. The implications of extreme concentrations of poverty, violence, absent parenting and urban migration, combined with blocked opportunities and substance abuse have created an environment that is conducive for the recruitment of youth into gangs."[10]

The reasons why Aboriginal youth turn to gangs can be found in the notion that gang life offers an alternative lifestyle and, for young men, an alternative masculinity. It is reported that for some, participation in gang culture has actually enabled a reconnection with culture, traditions, language, and community, "a sense of belonging, recognition, and self-esteem as they are establishing their personal identity and networks."[11] Though this may seem counterintuitive, it also demonstrates how the effects of colonialism can play out. "The experiences of the Aboriginal youth or adults who join gangs are too commonly rooted in personal experiences of colonialism, poverty, and discrimination, all of which affect the relationship of the individual to the community and to others."[12] Thus, gang life and its offerings can represent an alternative.

To understand how institutionalized and seductive this form of gangster masculinity (and all it symbolizes) has become, one need only compare the privileges and rationales for becoming involved in gang culture with those privileges and rationales associated with other institutions representing a brotherhood. For example, the privileges that accompany membership in a men's club on Wall Street or in the police force—community, security, loyalty, belonging, social status, networking, and capital—are ironically similar to those of a "street" gang despite the perception of one as "good" and the other as "bad."[13] Yet the gangsta archetype, rather than deconstructing the racist narratives attached to the "black man" or "indigenous man," substantiates familiar stereotypes, and gangsta remains synonymous with all young black or indigenous men, recoding them as dangerous, as a group to be feared, confined, and heavily policed.[14]

In relation to these unsound terms, gangsta culture is read and represented as also being synonymous with rap and hip-hop culture. Thus Aboriginal youth, especially young Aboriginal men dressed in hip-hop fashion, living in Regina's North Central or the Core are often read through this racist and ageist lens, and this contributes to a climate of fear of "the Aboriginal man" as dangerous and untrustworthy. Through such a climate it becomes even more evident how masculinity is integral to colonialism, locale, and power.

The music of hip hop, though diverse in approach, content, and delivery, is often used by different media sources, including the news, film, and television industries, to portray a stereotypical gangsta lifestyle and a persistent view of rap as negative and bound to the streets. Society at large still refuses "to distinguish between enabling, productive rap messages and the social violence that exists in many inner-city communities and that is often reflected in rap songs" (Dyson 2004, 63). There is an overarching generalization that because these life experiences are being represented in rap, the music only glorifies or glamorizes a gangster lifestyle. And though this may be the case in some instances, there are also examples of critical engagement with and critiques of gangster culture that express concerns about the social crisis and attitudes of the culture and that provide various strategies for challenging these narratives.[15]

The music culture and lifestyles associated with hip hop are highly racialized and read as Other. Much as with gangsta rap's evolution in African American communities, the themes expressed by it in Western Canadian inner cities with high Aboriginal populations are "drawn from the conflicts and contradictions of [Aboriginal] urban life" (ibid., 63). This distinction between more progressive and socially conscious rap music—depicting life experiences from inner city and marginalized communities—and the rap music that expresses a highly romanticized capitalist narrative of the gangsta lifestyle is often controversial among hip-hop artists themselves. To be "keepin' it real" can represent one's status on the street, or it can mean that one identifies with the roots and routes of hip-hop culture and its politically and socially conscious ideals. Yet proving that one has or has had a legitimate place on the street or in the 'hood still plays a significant role in determining a rapper's status, for "the 'hood prevails as hip-hop's dominant spatial trope" (Forman 2004, 156).

THE 'HOOD: CANADA'S WORST NEIGHBOURHOOD[16]

The 'hood prevails as hip-hop's dominant spatial trope.[17]

In the past few years, the social, cultural, and economic conditions experienced by many people living in Regina's inner city neighbourhoods (North Central and the Core) have come under scrutiny in APTN's critically acclaimed television series *Moccasin Flats;* in the now infamous article from *Maclean's* 12 January 2007 issue titled "Canada's Worst Neighbourhood"; current scholarly criticism (Ramsay 2008); in media accounts of Regina gangsta rap artist Robin Favel's ongoing confrontations with police; and in Cory Generoux's film *Dogz Lyfe: Burdens of a Gangster Rapper* (2008).

Journalists' reports and other media representations of Regina's 'hoods, though at times fictional and incomplete, generally tell stories of racial segregation, culture loss, poverty, and other systemic impacts of colonialism, including patriarchal and hetero-normative sensibilities. These stories have become the impetus for a reactionary politics on the part of the municipal government and have upset community groups that have been attempting to

demonstrate the vitality, creativity, and caring nature of these communities and of the city generally.[18] The national media attention has led to an injection of money into North Central and the Core in the form of new subsidized housing projects, support for social training programs for children and youth, an increase in community watches, a possible new high school building for Scott Collegiate (the only high school in North Central), funding support for community arts projects for youth, and the creation of artistic works, including hip-hop culture and its four primary elements (dj, rap, break, graffiti arts).[19]

The themes of space and place should be understood as "profoundly important" to the meaning found in hip-hop culture. The history of hip-hop culture is telling in that "virtually all of the early descriptions of hip-hop practices identify territory and the public sphere as significant factors, whether in the visible artistic expression and appropriation of public space via graffiti or B-boying, the sonic impact of a pounding bass line, or the discursive articulation of urban geography in rap lyrics" (Forman 2004, 155). For hip-hop artists, their home turf is often an integral part of the evolution of their art. "In practice, artists' lyrics and rhythms must achieve success on the home front first, where the flow, subject matter, style and image must resonate meaningfully among those who share common bonds to place, to the posse and to the 'hood" (208). In the case of Robin Favel, his flow, subject matter, style, and image represent the stereotypes of a gangsta rapper's life as well as the ongoing systemic impacts of colonialism in Regina.

To understand the urban landscape of Regina, one need only draw on the metaphor of the railway tracks—and who lives on which side of those tracks. With the CPR railway running through the middle of the city, residents have been divided into north and south along the signifiers of race and class. Ramsay explains how Regina's landscape evolved into its contemporary condition:

> In the 1960s, as people began immigrating from reserves to urban centres across Canada, Regina's downtown became a site of racial and class division between Aboriginals living mostly north of the CPR railway tracks that run along Dewdney Avenue, in an increasingly decaying North Central, and whites living "south of Dewdney" and in the burgeoning middle-class eastern and western suburbs, giving the lie to the colonizers' vision of Saskatchewan-style social justice and equality for all Canadians. (2010, 109)

The incredible wealth of parks and trees, the symbols of government, and the business districts of Regina are for the most part south of the tracks. North Central, a community initially read as working class, is now represented both within and outside the city as the 'hood or ghetto, which is code for home to Regina's poorest residents and most "dangerous" elements.[20]

The lie representing the colonizers' vision of social justice and equality that Ramsay refers to in the above passage is at the heart of the article "Canada's Worst Neighbourhood," written by Jonathan Gatehouse and published by *Maclean's* in 2007. Beginning with the question, "How did the province where Medicare was born end up with a city this frightening?" Gatehouse sets up the contradiction between Saskatchewan's reputation as a socially progressive province and the reality for those who live in its inner cities. The article continues with a report on the issues plaguing the neighbourhoods of North Central, the Core, and the entire city of Regina. Focusing specifically on poverty and gang-related behaviours, Gatehouse narrates his own experiences of being toured around North Central, creating vivid images of horrific circumstances connected to drug use, prostitution, poverty, and crime. Through Gatehouse's journalist lens, a national audience is introduced to one of many aspects of Regina's inner cities that are often left ignored by those living outside North Central.

For those on the outside, the 'hood is represented and viewed as a seedy urban underbelly, as a frightening place filled with crime and criminals. The 'hood is a place to be simultaneously observed and ignored, and the people who live there are objects to be stared at and understood only in relation to that place—under surveillance by the authorities but ignored by the rest of the city. One drives through the 'hood to look out at this "war zone" from behind the safety of a car window and a locked door, and only during daylight. It is a place of both fear and wonder, a place that seems both *un*real and *too* real. And the constructions of these readings—filled with hate and prejudice—are available to us within Canada's contemporary colonialist and racist nationalist framework, a framework that dehumanizes the Other, that constructs a false sense of security through obvious but invisible borders, and that permits ongoing unspeakable acts of psychic violence toward Aboriginal people.

The bordered areas of Regina's urban landscape can also be read in relation to similar circumstances in other cities across Canada and countries around the world where colonial rule persists in its effects, even though understood as over. Reflecting on South Africa's apartheid, J.M. Coetzee (2008) explains the significant impact that urban boundaries have on the economy and social status: "The institution of boundaries made upward mobility for blacks, and downward social mobility for whites, near to impossible, congealing class antagonism and race antagonism into a solid mass; while the machinery created to police those boundaries turned into the expensive, tentacular bureaucracy of the apartheid state" (106).

In making this connection to apartheid in South Africa through Coetzee's work, I am arguing that contemporary colonialism in Canada as enacted on a national level plays a primary role in what is happening in Regina and

North Central. Furthermore, I support Ramsay's argument that "the so-called 'Queen' City's deposing and descent into a metropolitan dystopia cannot simply be laid at the feet of its North Central citizens" (2010, 110). The existence of struggling neighbourhoods like North Central is entrenched in the historical and contemporary discourses of nation building and colonialism in Canada.

The lens through which Gatehouse represents North Central focuses on its "Third World" conditions—the poverty, violence, desolation, health crisis, drug trade, and gang culture, the rise in the number of Aboriginal youth who are forced to live in squalor, the lack of infrastructure and government support, the refusal of governments (municipal, provincial, federal) to provide for basic needs, and the continued denial by those living outside the 'hood that these conditions, and the people living in these conditions, exist. "Rather than Fiacco's 'it's all in the attitude "I love Regina"' campaign," Gatehouse suggests, "a real solution to Regina's crime woes will require a national effort to address the underlying social issues—poverty, unemployment and exclusion" (2007, 5). Indeed, when one looks beyond the borders of Regina, one finds that other inner city neighbourhoods and reserves are suffering horrific circumstances and that, also as in Regina, the issues are buried under statistics related to health (suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence) and crime (rise in gang culture and related activities). The result is a shift in blame as well as strategies for problem solving that are linked to the *symptoms* of crisis rather than to causes. The statistics presented in the 2005 *Criminal Intelligence Services Saskatchewan* report, as well as the Native Women's Association of Canada issue paper on Aboriginal Women and Gangs prepared for the National Aboriginal Women's Summit in 2007, directly link the rise in Aboriginal gang activity to the recruiting grounds found in correctional institutions. Gang life also offers incentives: "The gangs' allure—money, excitement, and a ready-made family—is hard for authorities to combat."[21] The effects of colonization are not limited to the past. Colonialism continues to affect contemporary lives and entire communities in multifaceted ways.

Gatehouse should be commended for reporting on the conditions of North Central and for helping publicly motivate people to take action to address these situations. However, as Ramsay suggests, "the portrait of a cheerless destiny [is not] the complete picture" (2010, 110) of North Central. As Ramsay conveys in her work on *Moccasin Flats* and its portrayal of the city: "Regina and North Central must be understood in the context of the racist legacies of a colonial nationalist modernity; the forces of postmodern globalization; the culture of urban poverty; the tensions between American media imperialism, Aboriginal cultural traditions, and masculine identity; and the dignity, resilience, and hope of the individuals and families who call these places home" (ibid.).

Though the *Maclean's* article painted a picture of North Central for the nation, there was little focus on any of the celebratory elements that exist there in spite of such horrific circumstances. North Central is home to vibrant, productive, and creative communities that want "to be involved in the solutions" (Brenda Mercer, in Gatehouse 2007, 5). For example, there are a number of community initiatives directed toward Aboriginal youth in North Central and the Core, such as the pedagogical methods found in project-based learning, which have been adopted at Scott Collegiate. This form of programming has succeeded in encouraging participation, attendance, and interest at the high school. In the fall of 2008, Scott Collegiate partnered with Sask In-Motion and the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs (Faculty of Fine Arts), along with the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina, to offer a program based on hip-hop culture and its creative elements. Hip-hop culture in this context shifts meaning away from the negative stereotypes associated with hip hop and presents alternative forms of masculinities and femininities. It also offers a collaborative and supportive mentoring environment, one that enables creative outlets for students to discuss and reflect on their lived experiences. Considering that most graduates of Scott Collegiate are women, the hip-hop program[22] has created another strategy for helping young Aboriginal men stay in school and finish a diploma. This is just one of the alternative programs that Gatehouse did not take up in his article.[23]

One week after Gatehouse's article was published, *Maclean's* published a second article, "For Regina, Anger Is No Substitute for Action," written by the editors in response to the reaction of Regina's mayor, Pat Fiacco, who referred to the article as a "shameful, sensationalistic, one-sided attack on his beloved city."[24] The editors pointed out that Gatehouse's sources had included civic leaders and community members, as well as statistics on crime, unemployment, and health. The editors went so far as to restate the original evidence that the city and the province were covering up the poor living conditions and high crime rate. They did so by calling into question arguments made by the Government of Saskatchewan's senior policy fellow, Fred Burch, who suggested that the indicators being used to calculate crime statistics in Saskatchewan were misleading and unfair. Though it is essential to analyze crime statistics and to call into question the methods used for analyzing statistical evidence—methods that are generally based on problematic and inconsistent categorical definitions, which leave little or no room for context—the process of scrutinizing the method of analysis often derails or limits the examination or actions needed to address the systemic problems underlying the crime statistics. In other words, the emphasis shifts away from the content, and the research becomes lost in the bureaucracies of method reform. The *Maclean's* editors criticized Fiacco for denying and massaging the facts, then concluded their article with wary praise for his organizing of the first City Hall summit with the leaders of southern Saskatchewan's First Nations. But they also offered this warning: "Engaging native leaders and facing up to these important issues will do far more to improve Regina's image—and the

facts that drive the image—than creating a media bogeyman and demanding that everyone put on a happy face."[25]

In the 17 January 2008 edition of *Maclean's*, the editors published another article, titled "Regina, One Year Later." The follow-up was a brief report on what had happened in North Central in the year since the original article was printed:

> A new sense of optimism has taken hold. Neighbourhood organizations have benefited from a steady stream of new funding for youth employment and skills training programs, with the prospect of more, particularly from Ottawa. Local businesses have stepped up to rescue the image of their city with money and volunteer time. There has been greater interaction between city hall and the native community, and talk of a new urban reserve. Just last week the Regina Police Service announced the creation of a new police district in the inner core—explicit recognition of the challenges the area faces. And citizens from all over the city have gotten more engaged.[26]

From the editors' point of view, their coverage of Regina's "dirty little secret" generated a national embarrassment and "played a small role as a catalyst for change."[27] More generally, there is a sense throughout the article that even though the coverage did not represent North Central outside of its social ills, the impact mainly benefited the community.[28] And though there have indeed been some benefits such as new funding initiatives for youth training programs and newly directed resources to North Central, the sensational reporting—with taglines such as "Canada's Worst Neighbourhood"—and the article's emphasis *only* on violent crime, prostitution, gang violence, drugs, and poverty—perpetuated a mapping of these social issues and their detrimental effects onto Othered bodies, in this case primarily on Aboriginal bodies and Aboriginal communities. Instead of formal acceptance of responsibility by governmental and institutional bodies, this kind of reporting often generates a "moral panic" and further embeds places, spaces, and people in a racist and racialized framework. This racialized discourse, no matter how it is mediated, can only be read as a violent discourse—as a contemporary colonial violence committed against individuals and communities by a media industry that has everything to gain and very little to lose.

THE JOURNEY OF ROBIN FAVEL: "I'VE GOT EVERYTHING TO GAIN, NOTHING TO LOSE"[29]

> Space and place are important factors that influence identity formation as they relate to localized practices of the self.[30]

In the recently released documentary film *Dogz Lyfe: Burdens of a Gangster Rapper* (2008), Robin Favel self-identifies as a gangster and a rapper living in North Central, drawing heavily on the popular phrase "keepin' it real," which began circulating in American hip-hop culture in the 1990s. "I just keep it real, and that's the respect I get, you know? Just keep it real and don't try to front. People enjoy hearing the truth as jagged as it may sound, you know?"[31] For Favel, "Keepin' it real" refers to his life philosophy, the way he lives his life as a gangster, the way he creates his raps and tells stories: "I feed off the energy I get from my people around me...which are so called gang members or drug dealers. So we sit on the range and they tell me stories, we exchange stories and most of the stories they tell me I just put them in rhyme form."[32] For Favel, music has become an outlet for conveying stories of the street and his experiences of growing up and living as an Aboriginal man in North Central. These stories are not necessarily symbolic of all young men who live in the 'hood, in spite of the media's tendency to portray Favel as the face of Aboriginal youth living in the 'hood; however, some of the anger and rage felt by a generation of Aboriginal youth, who suffer the ongoing influences of colonial legacies, can be heard in his raps.[33]

Dogz Lyfe is the name of the group that Favel (a.k.a. Burden) raps under. When asked the reason for the name in an interview, Favel responded: "The Dog Soldier is the last line of defence for the tribe."[34] Initially a duo of Favel, from Piapot First Nations, and Cameron Nicholls/Dellagnese (a.k.a. Infamous) from Regina, Dogz Lyfe began working together in 2003. They performed at rap battles, open mic nights, at the Crow Hop Café, and in other venues around Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Performing for a number of organizations across the region—including the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Big Soul Productions, Renegade Productions, the Saskatchewan Writer's Guild (Moose Jaw), the Regina Folk Festival 2003, the Royal Saskatchewan Museum's 2004 Youth Forum Symposium on Sustainability, and the 2004 National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation—Dogz Lyfe began to make a name for themselves. In 2004, Infamous left the group. Burden went on to produce a second album, this one titled *Ransom* (featuring Favel's sister, Danielle Favel, a.k.a. Dee).

Favel raps from the place of the inner city. Much as in narratives of the 'hood film genre and in the television series *Moccasin Flats*, in Favel's music "the city centre and its economy are re-imagined from the perspective of the ghetto as a 'structuring absence' that excludes [the ghetto]" (Ramsay 2010, 114). The result is that the audience is reminded that the ghetto narrative exists only in relation to the rest of the city. In telling stories, whether his own or those of people around him, Favel offers a glimpse into the life of a gangster living in North Central, sometimes performing the stereotypical gangster persona—"We live the life of hustlaz, gangstaz / can the lord even save us / people make assumptions / fuck y'all haters / this one's for the g's and the

playaz"[35]—but other times politicizing such stereotypes and challenging the state—"Canada's crossing their fingers / we don't rise and stand firm / rise together against the oppressor."[36]

In journalistic discourse (print, online, radio, and television alike), Favel is portrayed as a "loose canon," a young Aboriginal man who has been influenced by the likes of commercial gangster rapper 50Cent—"I listen to anybody who sings the real street, relates [to] the street and gets respect from the street while making it big... [In terms of a major label] 50 cent's G-Unit is where I want to be"[37]—and who eagerly relays to reporters stories about gang life and its influences on the streets of Regina: "'You really don't got to look far in this city,' he said. 'Everybody I grew up with is gang members [...] Gangs have hundreds of soldiers out there on the street initiating kids.'"[38] Obviously these sound bites are not always fully contextualized; thus, "truths" by both the subject of a story (Favel) and the conveyor of the story (media sources) can be exaggerated, sensationalized, or recontextualized to construct a story that presents a crisis, creates a climate of fear, and is worthy of news coverage.[39]

On Saturday, 18 August 2007, Favel and two other men found themselves in a standoff with the police,[40] who had responded to an anonymous call received at 6:19 a.m. about "a male entering the home with a firearm."[41] The difference from other Favel-related news was that in this instance Favel called Cory Generoux, a filmmaker who was documenting Favel's life for the new film *Dogz Lyfe: Burdens of a Gangsta Rapper* (2008). Generoux came to the scene with his video camera and recorded the standoff and subsequent arrests on film. Throughout the process, Generoux talked with Favel on his cellphone, finally convincing Favel to give himself up. Following the arrests, Generoux, responding to reporters about the connections between North Central and Favel, commented about how "the hip-hop musician is representative of the statistical numbers that are too often used in discussion of the neighbourhood."[42] It was at this point that Generoux made the statement I referred to earlier in the chapter: "[Favel] is the personification of that [North Central]."[43] In the media coverage, Favel's identity as a hip-hop (gangsta) rapper was constantly repeated, which reaffirmed the connections among violence, gang activity, and hip-hop culture. For Generoux, who had already created the short promotional video "The Journey of Robin Favel"—a teaser for the full-length film *Dogz Lyfe*—the footage became another layer to the Favel narrative.

At the beginning of the film, Infamous makes a connection between Favel's rap name, Burden, and Favel's life: "Burden is the burden of the city." The significance of the name "Burden" is not lost on Favel. This name, and the name Dogz Lyfe, which is tattooed on Favel's back, are explicit political statements concerning how he views his relationship to society.[44] In 2005, while talking to a CBC news reporter, Favel made it clear that he "sees the police

Arrested on camera

Regina Police Service was kept busy on Friday morning during a stand-off that resulted in the arrest of three people.

Subject of documentary in custody

By VERONICA RHODES
Leader-Post

Documentary filmmaker Cory Generoux (middle) films Friday's incident.

Figure 29 "Arrested on Camera," *The Leader-Post*, 18 August 2007. Copyright 2007 The Leader-Post. Used with permission.

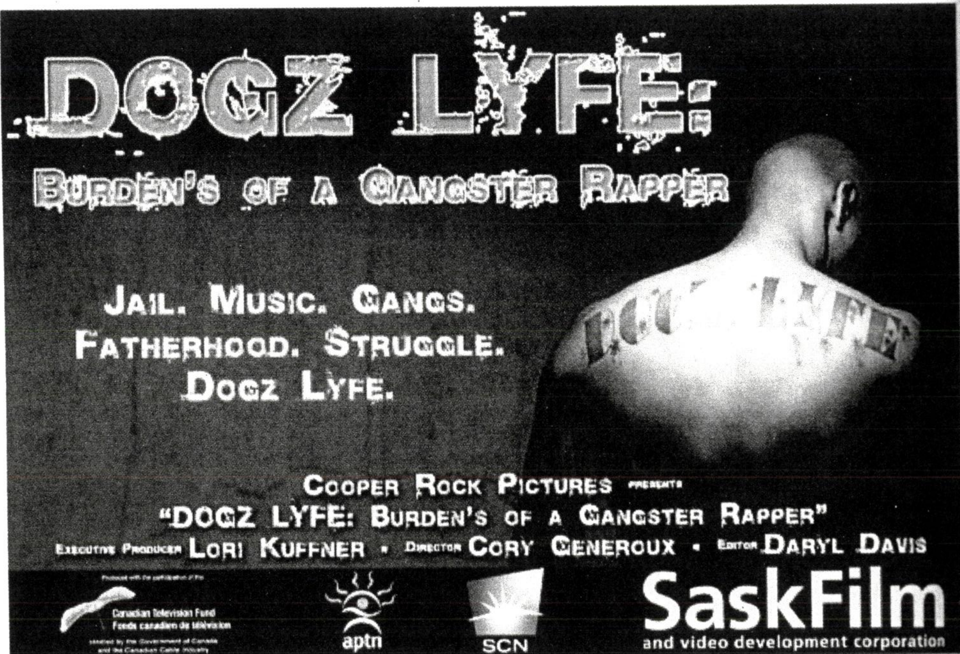

Figure 30 Poster for *Dogz Lyfe: Burdens of a Gangster Rapper.* Design by Cory Generoux (2008).

as the enemy and blames them and the correctional system for creating more gang members."[45] Describing both the jails and the 'hood, Favel remarked: "They organize us. We're all Aboriginal and they all stick us in one place."[46] In other words, though he is invested in gang culture and implicates himself as a gangsta, Favel is aware of and understands the role of the police as an arm of the state in creating the modern nation—a role that includes constructing North Central and Regina.

For Generoux, *Dogz Lyfe* (2008) represented an important journey for both Favel and himself. In the press release for the film, Generoux stated: "This was not an easy documentary to make but it was an important one... Our Elders tell us to never forget about those walking the broken circle, those who have strayed off the Red Road, incarcerated and living negatively." As the subject of this film, Favel "represents the very essence of why it is important not to forget, why it is important that the voice not get lost in the wind." And for Favel, his music has become an important symbol for his past *and* future life: "For most of his life, Robin Favel has lived a life of crime, has been a member of one of the most notorious gangs in Saskatchewan, The Native Syndicate, and has been in and out of jail numerous times." Yet in the documentary, Favel embraces his music as a possibility for something

different, as a way to resist the narrative that already seems predetermined based on his previous actions.

There are also moments in the film where the audience bears witness to an important anxiety that Favel suffers, one relating to his grandmother and his young daughter. Favel's grandmother, accompanied by his young daughter, arrives to take Favel home after he is released from the penitentiary. Prior to that, Favel had worried out loud that his daughter would have forgotten him and not known him as a father. The presence of his grandmother and daughter at this moment speak to another crisis of colonialism and its intersections with patriarchal systems of power and privilege. Here, the film highlights the harmful impacts of Favel's lifestyle and his performed masculinity, as well as predetermined caretaking roles, the latter too often being performed by grandmothers, who go unrecognized yet are always called upon to pick up the pieces and heal the wounds even while relegated to the position of Other. Coming back to Gilroy's critique of how the family trope is adopted in hip hop, and to LaRocque's (2007) description of how Aboriginal women live—"as victims of colonization and patriarchy, yet as activist and agents in their lives; as oppressed, yet as fighters and survivors; and as among the most stereotyped, dehumanized and objectified of women, yet as the strong, gracious and determined women that they are" (53)—the impact of gangsta rapper masculinity is severe, and so is the impact of the media's representations of that masculinity, especially on a community like North Central. At the moment when Favel hugs his grandmother, and then again when he embraces his daughter, these images bring to the fore the crisis that accompanies this masculinity, which is embedded in the "capitalist desiring machine" (Deleuze and Guattari 1972), is integral to colonialism, and ultimately sustains the tragic figure.

A critique of colonialism must include a critique of masculinity. Yet from Frantz Fanon (1961) to Taiaiake Alfred (2005), many theorists of colonialism have neglected analyses of masculinity and male privilege, or substantial gender analyses. Where are the stories of the women being told—stories that move beyond the tropes of mother/bitch/ho'? Where are the stories of alternative masculinities, the masculinities that lie outside these hip-hop representations and the stereotypes offered up through the colonial lens? Why are they not represented in journalistic discourse?

CONCLUSION: "DECLARATION OF WAR"

In *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Taiaiake Alfred calls for a rethinking of what it means to be an indigenous warrior. Critiquing the conventional reified representations of indigenous warriors offered up in the media, Alfred (2005) argues that

> we cannot hold on to a concept of the warrior that is gendered in the way it once was... The Indigenous warrior... must be rethought and recast from the solely masculine view of the old traditional ways to a new concept of the warrior that is freed from colonial gender constructions and articulated instead with reference to what really counts in our struggles: the qualities and the actions of a person, man or woman, in battle. (84)

In other words, one cannot simply declare "I am warrior"; rather, one *becomes* a warrior through actions that are motivated by a "sense of responsibility to alleviate suffering and recreate the conditions of peace and happiness" (86). A warrior "takes action to change the conditions that cause suffering for the people in both the immediate (self-defence) and long-term (self-determinate) sense" (87). And most important, "the warrior does not focus on abstract or historical injustices and believes wholeheartedly that the ability to generate change is within the power of the people" (87).

In relation to gangsta rap in Regina, this concept of an indigenous warrior is lost. Favel's hip-hop masculinity, though repeatedly represented through a colonialist and racist lens in the media, only serves to perpetuate predictable narratives bound within a capitalist, patriarchal, and colonialist framework. These narratives offer little or no disruption of the status quo; hegemony is solidified. Yet Favel cannot be written off so easily, as is illustrated in the film *Dogz Lyfe: Burdens of a Gangsta Rapper.* There are moments in his music and in the telling of his stories where Favel leans just slightly away from the capitalist desiring machines toward the possibilities of something else, something different. Robin Favel is indicative of the crisis facing marginalized and minoritized Aboriginal youth living in North Central and, more generally, the crisis that is Regina. He raps about how the violence of colonialism (and the construction of the nation-state) is threatened by his own violence—the violence of the gangsta rapper—which is in turn confronted by the police and then challenged by the technocratic programs of the state. Yet Favel also romanticizes the hip-hop gangster life, the ghetto, and patriarchal privileges associated with money, power, and the oppression of women and one's community. His idea of "keepin' it real" continues to swing back and forth like a pendulum, always in question.

Robin Favel and his 'hood, North Central, continue to be represented by the media as something to be feared and as something dangerous. These representations, however, symbolize the uncertainties and anxieties embedded in Canada's contemporary colonial practices, and they speak to the ongoing violence inherent in how a nation is constructed. Returning to the quotation that began this chapter—"The police organize us. We're all Aboriginal and they all stick us in one place"—it is apparent that Favel, too, is engaged in a critical dialogue about colonialism and its current impacts. And though his voice is heard through the medium of gangsta rap, and he often falls into the dominant tropes associated with a problematic hip-hop masculinity, rap is an integral place for Favel to tell his stories. As has been demonstrated historically, rap music and hip-hop culture have the power to bind "locale, resistance, innovation, affirmation, and cultural identity within a complex web of spatialized meanings and practices" (Forman 2004, 155). These meanings and practices are diverse even in North Central, and therein lies the possibility for powerful resistance to and disruption of existing narratives.

NOTES

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1 For a discussion on rap music as an important global culture, see Tony Mitchell, "Another Root: Hip-Hop Outside the U.S.A," in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the U.S.A.*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 1–38; and Andy Bennett, "Hip-Hop am Main, Rappin' on the Tyne: Hip-Hop Culture as a Local Construct in Two European Cities," in *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 177–200. For specific examples of how rap has been appropriated in western Canada, see Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Charity Marsh, "'Bits and Pieces of Truth': Storytelling, Identity, and Hip Hop in Saskatchewan," forthcoming in *Perspectives on Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Canada,* ed. A. Hoefnagels and B. Diamond (Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2011).

2 Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

3 Veronica Rhodes, "Arrested on Camera," *The Leader-Post* (Regina), 18 August 2007. http://www.canada.com/reginaleaderpost/story.html?id=979625f0-06, accessed 1 April 2008.

4 Reagan Kelly, "Hip-Hop Chicano: A Separate but Parallel Story," in *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Marc Anthony Neal (Routledge: New York, 2004), 95.

5 One need only look to Tupac or Biggie Small for famous examples of the tragic masculine figure who is represented as both hero and villain.

6 One example I offer is rapper 50 Cent. 50 Cent's tales of living as a gangster, and his multiple scars from being shot, have given his hip-hop persona legitimacy. These narratives are used to promote his image and music as well as his film, *Before I Self Destruct* (2008).

7 Though there is an extensive repertoire of rap that challenges these attitudes, sexism and misogyny can easily be found in lyrics, images, and attitudes, and also in the persistence with which women are objectified as possessions and as signifiers of wealth. In spite of an increased presence of women in hip-hop culture—examples include Missy Elliott, Queen Latifah, Lady Sovereign, and MC Lyte—the privileges associated with patriarchy are firmly entrenched. Examples can be found in the lyrics of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg's "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang," http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Nuthin-But-A-G-Thang-lyrics-Dr-Dre/941B60C911F835E348256887002507CD; Too $hort's "Ain't Nuthin' Like Pimpin'," http://www.lyricstime.com/too-short-ain-t-nuthin-like-pimpin-lyrics.html; and 50 Cent's "P.I.M.P.," http://www.absolutelyrics.com/lyrics/ view/50_cent/p.i.m.p, all three accessed 22 October 2008.

8 Indigenous studies scholar Emma LaRocque calls attention to the importance of context and the contradictory ways of reading how Aboriginal women live: "as victims of colonization and patriarchy, yet as activist and agents in their lives; as oppressed, yet as fighters and survivors; and as among the most stereotyped, dehumanized, and objectified of women, yet as the strong, gracious and determined women that they are." Emma LaRocque, "Métis and Feminist: Ethical Reflection on Feminism, Human Rights and Decolonization," in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism,* ed. Joyce Green (Halifax: Fernwood, 2007), 53–71 at 53.

9 See Mitchell, "Another Root"; Bennett, "Hip-Hop am Main"; and Marsh, "Bits and Pieces of Truth."

10 *Criminal Intelligence Service Saskatchewan* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2005).

11 "Aboriginal Women and Gangs: An Issue Paper," prepared for the National Aboriginal Women's Summit, 20–22 June 2007, 1.

12 Ibid., 1.

13 These examples were part of a discussion that Darci Anderson and I had during and following a panel discussion held in Regina on 25 October 2008 in conjunction with the *Mispon Indigenous Film Festival.* Addressing the Chief of Police, one audience member repeated a comment that had been conveyed to him about how the police and correctional services in Canada could be viewed as the "biggest" gang. The Chief of Police responded with a statement suggesting that the psychological profile of police officers was quite different from those of a gang member. In an effort to contextualize the previous statement, Darci Anderson then asked why white men of the corporate world joined men's clubs. Listing off reasons such as community, brotherhood, networking, and status, Anderson suggested that young Aboriginal men in Canada joined gangs for much the same reasons that people joined the police force, and that businessmen joined men's clubs.

14 In Canada there have been a number of documented cases of racial profiling. One only has to scan the headlines in stories filed by the *Globe and Mail*'s Kirk Makin: "Police use racial profiling, appeal court concludes" (17 April 2003, A1); "Police engage in profiling, chief counsel tells court" (18 January 2003, A1). In Saskatchewan recently, there was an investigation into the death of Neil Stonechild, who, along with many other Aboriginal men and women at various times, had been dropped off outside the city limits by police during the freezing winter. This practice had even been given a name: "The Starlight Tour." Susanne Reber and Robert Renaud, "A Cold and Desperate Walk," *Maclean's*, 14 November 2005, 94–100.

15 For example, see Marsh, "'Bits and Pieces of Truth.'" Hear examples of alternative and challenging lyrics in Eekwol's song "Let's Move" from her and her brother Mils's 2007 album *The List;* and Oyé!'s performance of "Chan Chan" featuring rapper Def3 at http://interactivemediaandperformance.com.

16 This is the title of the article from the 15 January 2007 issue of *Maclean's* written by Jonathon Gatehouse.

17 Murray Forman, "Ain't No Love in the Heart of the City: Hip-Hop, Space, and Place," in *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 156.

18 For video responses, go to "North Central Regina 'Through Our Eyes,'" http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=9UmEv-I1Q-k&feature=related, and "Canada's Worst Neighborhood... Northcentral?" http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=S2lQMZ_rc60, accessed 18 September 2008.

19 For an in-depth analysis of community-based arts programming around the hip-hop elements in Saskatchewan, refer to Marsh, http://www.charitymarsh.com/Dr._Charity_Marsh/Indigenous_Hip_Hop.htm).

20 The pairing of poverty and crime is not a new phenomenon, however problematic or unfounded. Doug Cuthand, "Less Poverty Means Less Crime," *The Leader Post* (Regina), 25 August 2008, A3.

21 Jonathon Gatehouse, "Canada's Worst Neighbourhood: How Did the Province Where Medicare Was Born End Up with a City This Frightening?" *Maclean's,* 15 January 2007.

22 Hip-hop culture has historically been gendered male for a variety of reasons. In its infancy, hip hop was about the reclamation of public space and the building of community on the streets. The public sphere has long been understood as a male privilege, whereas the private sphere (i.e., the home) has been interpreted as the place for girls and women. Throughout the evolution of hip-hop culture, the exclusion of women, or the relegation of women to the status of objects, has become entrenched. Thus, hip-hop, its cultural practices, and the technologies associated with these practices continue to be gendered—problematically so—in masculine terms. And though there are a number of women who participate in the culture and perform as rappers, DJs, B-Girls, and graffiti artists, the culture continues to reflect a patriarchal norm.

23 Understandably, this particular hip-hop program had not yet started. But this is not the first program dedicated to youth in this 'hood challenging the stereotypes and conditions through creative practices. http://www.macleans.ca/article.jsp?content=20070115_139375_139375

24 Gatehouse, "Canada's Worst Neighbourhood," http://www.macleans.ca/article.jsp?content=20070129_139986_139986.

25 Mayor Fiacco's and a local radio station's outrageous reaction to the initial article—throwing copies of *Maclean's* into a woodchopper—demonstrates an explicit denial of Gatehouse's report. Yet the report forced the mayor (and the city council) to take some action. Gatehouse, "Canada's Worst Neighbourhood."

26 The Editors, "Regina: One Year Later," *Maclean's*, 17 January 2008, http://www.macleans.ca/canada/opinions/article.jsp?content=20080117_95971_95971.

27 Ibid.

28 It is also significant that most if not all of these benefits are tied to the economy, which is narrow in its scope and imagination in terms of what is important to healthy and safe communities and neighbourhoods.

29 Robin Favel, in *Dogz Lyfe: Burdens of a Gangsta Rapper,* dir. Corey Generoux. Regina: Cooper Rock Pictures, 2008.

30 Forman, "Ain't No Love," 155.

31 Favel, *Dogz Lyfe*.
32 Ibid.
33 The impacts of contemporary colonialism on Aboriginal women in relation to the discourse on hip-hop culture are taken up later in this chapter.
34 Go to http://www.soundclick.com/bands/default.cfm?bandID=45117.
35 "Hustlaz," *Dogz Lyfe*, featuring Big Sav. Go to http://www.soundclick.com/bands/default.cfm?bandID=45117&content=music.
36 "Declaration of War," *Dogz Lyfe*. Go to http://www.soundclick.com/bands/default.cfm?bandID=45117&content=music.
37 Go to http://www.soundclick.com/bands/default.cfm?bandID=45117.
38 Favel, quoted by *CBC News*, 22 March 2005, in Daniel Johnson, "Robin Favel A.K.A. Burden," http://www.joybuzzard.com/danieljohnson/robinfavel.html, accessed 2 May 2011.
39 For a discussion of the relationship between music cultures and media-related moral panics, see Charity Marsh, "Understand Us Before You End Us: Regulation, Governmentality, and the Confessional Practices of Raving Bodies," *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 415–30.
40 See Figure 1.
41 Veronica Rhodes, "Arrested on Camera," *The Leader-Post* (Regina) 18 August 2007, A1.
42 Ibid.
43 Generoux, in ibid.
44 Refer to Figure 2.
45 Johnson, "Robin Favel A.K.A. Burden."
46 Ibid.