Examining Indigenous youth empowerment through aesthetics and hip hop culture: A case study of ‘Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture’

EDU6428 Social Contexts of Education

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*Native graffiti art, indigenized iPods©, Inuit break dancing, indigenous-language hip hop and video, Indian bling and urban wear: the roots of hip hop culture and music have been transformed by indigenous cultures and identities into new forms of visual culture and music that echo the realities of Aboriginal people. Beat Nation is about music, it’s about art and it’s about the spirit of us as indigenous peoples and cultures* (*Beat Nation*, 2006).

Introduction

Hip hop has been around for over three decades. It was originally created by Black and

Latino youth in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, as a response to social and economic

injustices being perpetuated by the elite members of society (Lefebvre, 2014). Youths responses

to the downsizing of their futures was to look to their creative impulses, gaining strength and

credibility through a creative process of building something out of nothing (Malott & Profilio,

2014). Original hip hop artists like Grandmaster Flash, Whodini, DJ Kool Herc, the Fat Boys and

Sugar Hill Gang wrote and performed hip hop songs about issues that marginalized youth were

actually feeling, issues of despair, family life, the ‘hood, and politics, and they did it in a way

that connected with these youths and made them feel like they too could be a part of something.

In this way, hip hop represents youths’ critical modes of self-expression and reflects their

yearning to be recognized, heard and included in society, not simply swept to the side (Love, 2014). The criticalness and rallying power of hip hop has caused its reach to be widespread, becoming​ ​popular​ ​with​ ​youth​ ​all​ ​over​ ​North​ ​America​ ​and​ ​internationally, ​as​ ​well.

An example of the infusion of hip hop culture and identity into non-traditional areas is the museum exhibition ‘*Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture’.* *Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture* was originally created by Tania Willard and Skeena Reece in 2006 as a website designed to highlight the creative and inspirational work of Indigenous artists, as well as demonstrate the diverse ways in which hip hop culture and Indigenous culture can be fused and re-mixed to create a whole new genre of educational and empowering art. In her curatorial message, Tania Willard writes, “Aboriginal artists have taken hip hop influences and indigenized them to fit Aboriginal experiences: The roots of hip hop are there but they have been ghost-danced by young Native artists who use hip hop culture’s artistic forms and combine them with Aboriginal story, experience and aesthetics” (*Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture*, 2006). Based off the ground work of the original website, the exhibition “*Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture”* made its way across Canada and was featured in museums and art galleries such as the SAW Gallery in Ottawa, la Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal and The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, to name a few. Co-curated by Tania Willard, a Secwepemc artist, and Kathleen Ritter, Associate curator of the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Beat Nation* featured painting, sculpture, installation, performance and video, all created by a generation of artists who “juxtapose urban culture with Aboriginal identity to create innovative and unexpected new works that reflect the realities of Aboriginal peoples today” (Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2018). The exhibition is a ground-breaking site for the promotion of traditional Indigenous knowledges, cultures and motifs through the interplay of hip hop and contemporary popular culture. Because of its ingenuity, *Beat Nation* should be examined even more closely to understand its complexities and its potential as a venue for empowerment and the encouragement of agency in today’s Canadian Indigenous youth.

This paper will examine the potential for Indigenous youth empowerment through in-depth case study and analysis of the exhibition ‘*Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture’*. My research was conducted based on three specific questions: 1. How do hip hop culture and Indigenous culture come together in the case of the museum exhibit *Beat Nation*?; 2. How does *Beat Nation* promote Indigenous culture and identity and does it have the potential to empower Indigenous youth?; and 3. Based off this analysis, are there implications from *Beat Nation* to inform future practices and movements? This research’s aim is to fill a gap in knowledge and to make recommendations for the use of culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and argues for movement away from ‘traditional’ and ‘colonial’ ways of knowing (Westheiemer, 2015). I will introduce current research examining both hip hop culture and Indigenous culture separately, as well as a few studies which have incorporated these two cultures together and have served as a jumping-off point for my own case study of *Beat Nation*. To demonstrate my thinking, I have created a visual representation of the conceptual framework I have adopted to work through this research process and aid in my understanding of the nuances in my findings. Using a definition adopted from Lee and Chen (2014), I will operationalize what I consider to be ‘empowerment’ and how Indigenous youth have used *Beat Nation* to achieve their own empowerment. In my discussion I will highlight my findings on the intersection of hip hop culture and Indigenous culture through the exhibit of *Beat Nation* and demonstrate how the specific pieces and work of the artists encourages empowerment. Finally, I will conclude by introducing the Indigenous youth-led movement Idle No More, demonstrating how these findings can be transferred to other current examples of Indigenous youth empowerment.

Literature Review

*Hip-hop is a type of way to show expression; it is a way to show your true personality. Hip-hop is not just a way to express your identity, but it is a way to show the reality of you to other individuals. Hip-hop also causes a connection to other individuals. It creates conversation, friendly debates, and competition with another. Hip-hop can also be a coping mechanism for those who need a way to express themselves.* -Anonymous​ ​Student​ (Donato, 2017, ​​p.​ ​30)

Hip hop is not just about music. When we say hip hop, we also mean rapping, dancing,

deejaying, emceeing and writing (graffiti) (Chang, 2005; Lefebvre, 2014; Newman, 2005). It is

within all these elements of hip hop that culture emerges and youth are able to make

connections to similarities between the songs, the movements, the words and their own lives.

Hip hop is a cultural teacher, a method to grasp cultural concepts that ‘elude young

minds’, a provider of a sense of identity and a means to allow youth to be heard and included in the democratic processes of a society that they may otherwise be excluded from (Lefebvre,

2014). The foundations of hip hop as a provider of identity and as a means to encourage agency

and produce social change has great implications for today’s youth, particularly amongst today’s

urban youth and students. “In particular, scholars have shown how the elements of hip hop culture - rap music, turntablism, break dancing, graffiti culture, fashion and language - can be used within classrooms to improve student motivation, teach critical media literacy, foster critical consciousness, and transmit disciplinary knowledge” (Hill, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, Davies (2012) describes the ways in which hip hop culture pulls on the organic and local culture of students and other youth to help them see the ways in which grassroots movements engage learners and help produce transformation.

For this paper, it is also necessary to examine the literature on the historical positioning of Indigenous people in the Canadian context. Between 1871 and 1921 a series of treaties (treaties 1-11) were signed between the Canadian government and many local Indigenous tribes which in effect gave Ottawa control over the indigenous land and put their people under the ‘care’ of the federal government (Angus, 2015). What followed was the systematic removal of Indigenous culture from Canada through the upheaval of more than 150,000 Indigenous children from their homes and their subsequent placement into residential schools across the country (British Columbia Teacher’s Federation, 2015). For more than one hundred years, Indigenous people in Canada experienced total cultural genocide at the hands of other Canadians. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) describes cultural genocide as the destruction of those structures and practices that allow a group to continue as a group through the destruction of political and social institutions, the seizure of land, the restriction of movement, the eradication of language, the persecution of spiritual leaders, and the disruption of the family unit to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. This research acknowledges the historical silencing and mistreatment of Indigenous Canadians and recognizes the need for a resurgence of knowledge surrounding Indigenous culture and identity. For a more complete historical account of residential schools and the experiences of Indigenous Canadians, see Angus (2015), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), Milloy (1999), and Bombay, Matheson & Anisman (2014).

To demonstrate the affordances of combining hip hop culture with Indigenous culture and the potential for making claims for youth empowerment based off this cultural integration, I introduce the work of Brooks et al. (2015) and Biggs-El (2012). First, Brooks et al. (2015) investigated the positive outcomes in relation to the adoption of elements of rapper Tupac Shakur’s ‘Thug-life’ and hip hop culture in resilience-building for youth in six different Saskatchewan First Nations communities. Brooks et al. (2015) found that Aboriginal youth may be drawn to Tupac’s work because it promotes “a struggle for social justice in the face of extreme poverty or racism” (p. 715) that many youths can relate to, and that hip hop allows them to create a space where they belong, which they struggle with in their own communities, home and schools. Furthermore, the work of Biggs-El (2012) on the use of rap music and spoken word as a critical method of empowerment offers yet more support for the examination of *Beat Nation* as a contribution to the body of knowledge surrounding the incorporation of hip hop and Indigenous cultures. Writing in an American context, Biggs-El (2012) states:

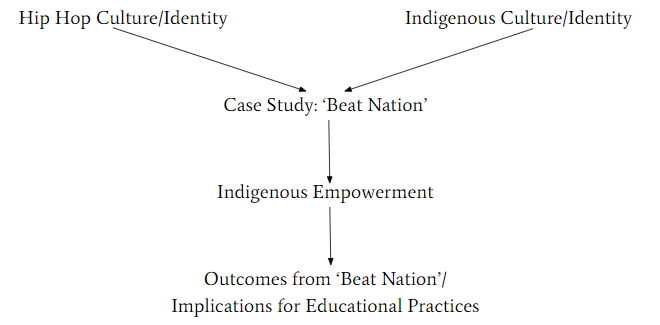
The public forum of rap and spoken word serves as a means through which intensely disaffected young people have produced and maintained notions of community and self. It illustrates how the reflexive use of performative arts and strategies subvert colonial racial representations, and addresses issues of social justice, equity, and healing (p. 162).

Through her examination of a variety of social venues and gathering places outside of the traditional walls of learning where rap and indigenous spoken word was being shared, Biggs-El (2012) concluded that “Indigenous projects like rap music and spoken word poetry turn the pedagogies of oppression and colonization into pedagogies of liberation, for an emancipatory praxis must be informed by the experiences and voices of the disempowered” (p. 166). It is from these research projects that we turn to the specific case of *Beat Nation*, as it also incorporates Indigenous culture with hip hop culture as a tool for youth empowerment and expression, turning historically disenfranchised Indigenous people into agents of change and voices of strength for all.

Conceptual Framework

To further understand my research questions and the direction of my project, I designed a conceptual framework which is presented in Table 1.1. This diagram serves to demonstrate the intended directional movement between ideas as well as my methods of linking each concept to the next. To answer my first research question, I begin with describing the two separate concepts of hip hop culture/identity and Indigenous culture/identity, which I have begun to do through my review of the literature on there two cultures, identifying the ways in which the tenets of each overlap to create a milieu conducive to the fusion of the two cultures. This fusion is demonstrated in the specific case of the museum exhibition *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, which I will dissect to answer my second research question. To answer this question, it is also necessary to operationalize what I mean by ‘empowerment’.

Table 1.1: *Conceptual Framework diagram*



To define empowerment, I turn to the work of Lee and Chen (2014), which examined issues that Indigenous Taiwanese youth were facing, specifically exploring the role of non-profit organizations in empowering young Taiwanese people to seek out valuable connections and potential employment opportunities. Although this study was conducted in Taiwan, I have found many parallels between the historical and political contexts of Taiwanese Aboriginal youth Canadian Indigenous youth, and so I believe this study is relevant to my own research. For this reason, I have borrowed Lee and Chen’s (2014) definition of empowerment for the Taiwanese Aboriginal youth in their research and applied it to the Canadian Indigenous youth working in *Beat Nation*. Empowerment is defined as: “developing a sense of duty (responsibility); facing frustrating school experiences; developing leadership; learning about own culture and mother tongue language; experiencing community, team, sharing, self-confidence and self-esteem” (Lee and Chen, 2014, p. 8). The following section will describe the methods which I used to conduct my research on *Beat Nation*.

Methods

This research looks at the specific case of the museum exhibition *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture.* “Case study is the study of particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). To generate and in-depth understanding and generate knowledge (Yin, 1994) about the intersection of Indigenous culture and hip hop culture and its implications for the empowerment of Indigenous Canadian youth, I have chosen to examine the specific case of *Beat Nation*. Because case study method relies on deep description of one specific case in specific contexts, it is difficult to generalize about the findings or apply them to other contexts (Stake, 1995), however through the analysis of *Beat Nation* it is my aim to begin the conversation about instances of empowerment for Indigenous Canadian youth. To build my understanding of the fusion of Indigenous culture and hip hop culture, I conducted an in-depth study of the background information, curatorial statements and the work and statements from the artists available on the *Beat Nation* website, as well as an analysis of external interview documents and multiple exhibit reviews. To present my findings, I will focus on three specific pieces of art in the *Beat Nation* exhibit and discuss how they each individually and collectively work to empower both their creators as well as the Indigenous youth who experience them.

Findings and Discussion

Before her work with *Beat Nation*, Tania Willard was involved with *Redwire Magazine*, a native youth led project which was “born out of the *Native Youth Movement* and native youth stepping up and calling out the BC Treaty Process for not acknowledging [their] needs and futures and also negotiating away [their] rights” (Martineau, 2014, p. 219). The magazine was distributed all over Turtle Island (North America) and expressed native youth’s ideas, stories, politics, histories and more (Martineau, 2014). To address my first research question, I would like to point out here the parallels between the foundations of *Beat Nation*, constructed from the building blocks of Indigenous struggle and the need to be heard with the similar foundations of hip hop culture described by Lefebvre (2014), Malott and Profilio (2014), Love (2014) and Davies (2012). As a medium, hip hop can be employed to express the social dynamics and struggles of historically impoverished and marginalized groups (Harnett, 2012). Through the work of the numerous artists with installations in the exhibition, *Beat Nation* has successfully fused traditional Indigenous culture with the resilience-based culture of hip hop, raising a symbolic microphone to their historically silenced voices.

The second question which guided my study of *Beat Nation* examined how the exhibition promotes Indigenous culture and identity, and using Lee and Chen’s (2014) definition, whether it has the potential to empower Indigenous youth. Here I introduce three artistic pieces from the exhibition, created by Indigenous artists, all of which fuse the ideologies of the two cultures together in provocative and innovative ways. The first (seen in Figure 1.1) entitled *Raven: On the Colonial Fleet* (2010), was created by Skeena Reece, one of the original minds behind *Beat Nation*. In this performance work, Reece combines elements of hip hop and Indigenous dress and culture in unthought-of ways, mixing and bending traditional ideas of fashion and gender, while also blurring the lines between warrior and ‘gangsta’. Claxton (2017) has remarked:

[t]his mix of the political, cultural and sexual creates a dynamism that exposes the complexities of NDN [shorthand spelling for Indian] womynhood in urban realities and how femyle leadership and hauntings of matriarchal ways of being have transformed and are steadfast within the very creation of contemporary art (p. 1).

This artistic installation demonstrates empowerment through the sharing of traditional and non-traditional cultural dress, as well as the positive messages of female self-confidence and self-esteem which Reece describes feeling through her creation of the piece.

The second piece of art which I introduce is *Turning Tables* (2010) (pictured in Figure 1.2), created by Jordan Bennett, a self-described Mi’kmaq Indian from the west coast of Newfoundland (*Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture*, 2006). I find the following description written by Harnett (2012) summarizes *Turning Tables* incredibly eloquently:

*Turning Tables* (2010) is a beautifully handcrafted mixing table made out of different woods, including walnut, oak and spruce. On the left-hand side, a record needle is placed on a cross section of a tree shaped like a record: it plays the sound of the tree’s rings. The opposite side spins another wooden record. This one presents Bennett’s voice learning words in his Mi’kmaq language. It is a metaphor that asserts the continuation of ancestral knowledge in a technologically laden contemporary society (p. 180).

Bennett’s work is another example of the literal remixing of Indigenous and hip hop culture, using what may be considered the epitome of hip hop, the deejay’s turntable, as his base, yet constructing it using materials found in nature and projecting his own voice in his native language. Bennett describes his craft as a process of pushing boundaries and playing with ideas of traditional Aboriginal artefact and ceremony; an attempt to provoke the viewer to question what is means to be “Indian” in contemporary North American society (*Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture*, 2006). *Turning Tables* (2010) presents a strong Indigenous voice (literally using Bennett’s voice), demonstrating that the historical silencing of Indigenous people cannot continue. He provides a site for empowerment through the combination of his own artistic work and his positioning as a leader in the community, connecting himself deeply to his heritage. Furthermore, with the projection of his own voice he is lending a voice to Indigenous Canadian across the country, increasing cultural awareness, promoting confidence and emphasizing cultural pride, all of which combine for the potential for empowerment of Indigenous youth.

The final piece which I will introduce from the exhibition *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, is [Anishinaabensag Biimskowebshkigewag](http://www.artprize.org/dylan-miner/2015/anishinaabensag-biimskowebshkigewag-native-kids-ride-bikes" \t "_blank)(Native Kids Ride Bikes), created by Dr. Dylan Miner, a Wiisaakodewinini Métis artist, which features four bicycles mounted on individual platforms (see Figure 1.3). Miner worked with Indigenous youth to create these low-rider bikes, tricked out with the thoughtful use of indigenous craftsmanship and materials, including painted hides, hand-drums, fur covered saddles, feathers and woven beadwork (Poitra, 2015). Miner says that his work, like many of the pieces in *Beat Nation*, plays off the theme of the “claiming of space, like a slow-and-low moving low-rider, backing up traffic and demanding attention” (Sommerstein, 2014). This piece, through its combination of contemporary and urban objects (low-rider bicycles), with the traditional indigenous values and tribal-specific styling, is yet another example of the creative possibilities made into reality through the fusion of Indigenous and hip hop culture. The fact that Miner worked with native youth throughout the creative process lends itself to the elements of empowerment visible in this piece, as well. Indigenous youth are having a say; they are connecting to historical, political and social issues, they are taking up space, they are unapologetic.

Figure 1.1 *Raven: On the Colonial Fleet* (2010) Figure 1.2 *Turning Tables* (2010)

Figure 1.3 [Anishinaabensag Biimskowebshkigewag](http://www.artprize.org/dylan-miner/2015/anishinaabensag-biimskowebshkigewag-native-kids-ride-bikes)(Native Kids Ride Bikes)



*Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* is an edgy and creative fusion of traditional Indigenous cultural heritage with the roots and tenets of contemporary hip hop culture, the outcome of which is a beautiful site for the recognition and celebration of Indigenous history and the encouragement of Indigenous youth empowerment. To demonstrate the connections between Indigenous culture and hip hop culture in this exhibit, I have introduced three specific art installations created by Indigenous artists, demonstrating the fusion of ‘gangsta’ regalia, turntables and low-rider bikes with the traditional ideologies and materials of Indigenous Canadians. Based on Lee and Chen’s (2014) definition, I have made explicit how these creative pieces not only empower the artists themselves, but also empower the Indigenous youth who experience them. Indigenous youth are able to learn about their culture and native languages, witness and identify with the powerful work that other Indigenous youth and elders are doing both locally and nationally and develop a sense of self-confidence that was in effect stolen away from them over one hundred years ago.

Conclusion

In recent years, Indigenous youth have begun to recognize the power which lies within the elements of hip hop. Tania Willard, co-curator of the Indigenous aesthetic/hip hop culture mixing exhibit *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, describes hip hop as storytelling, but an empowering way for young people to tell their stories (Martineau, 2014). In the wake of the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the apology from the Canadian government to all Indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), researchers have started examining the ways in which Indigenous youth are taking back their culture, celebrating their history, and building up their resilience, all through the adoption of the empowering elements of hip hop culture.

This paper has examined *Beat Nation* as a case study for the intersection of Indigenous culture with hip hop culture and the implications of such mixing for the empowerment of Canadian Indigenous youth. *Beat Nation* and other such initiatives are giving Indigenous youth back their voice. An example of such an initiative is Indigenous-women-led movement called Idle No More. This grassroots initiative among the Indigenous people in Canada, comprising of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and their non-Indigenous allies, began in December of 2012, right around the peak time of *Beat Nation’s* Canadian tour. The Idle No More movement calls on all people “to join in a peaceful revolution, to honor Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water” (Idle No More website, 2018). As quoted in Sommerstein (2014), Geromino Inutiq, a.k.a. Madeskimo says,

Idle No More and *Beat Nation* are of a piece. We’re not idle anymore. See us in the governments and the institutions and the companies. See us on T.V. […] We’re not sitting there idly on our reserves, waiting to die. We’re agents of change within society and that’s what it means.

Through movements like Idle No More, Indigenous youth are speaking up and speaking out, rallying Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies across the country and the world to have their history and culture heard, celebrated and included. They are rallying through all means available to them, including the fusion of their culture with the differently, yet similarly disenfranchised elements of hip hop culture, in ways such as the exhibit *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*. *Beat Nation* represents the diversity of being Indigenous today; it is traditional, spiritual and respectful, yet it is fluid, in a constant state of flux and flow, rhythm and beats, movement and growth.

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