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Abo-Digitalism Youth Identity, Critical Pedagogy, and Popular Media

Colin Scheyen

In an interview with *Local Noise*, Australian rapper MC Wire effectively describes his unique identity as a contemporary musician and as an Australian Aboriginal male: “I’m abo-digital [he explains] because I’m a 21st century Aboriginal, I’m down with laptops and mobile phones and home entertainment. But digital also means your hands and your fingers. I’m still putting my fingers in the dirt; I’m still using my hands to create things” (as cited in Mitchell, 2006). MC Wire’s words demonstrate that in spite of the fact that the mainstream media frequently depicts indigenous cultures as static and primitive, they are in fact dynamic and susceptible to vigorous change and progression. Hip Hop is one such form of expression that has been embraced by colonized people around the world and has played a key role in uniting indigenous cultures’ past and present conditions because of its adaptable sounds and style and its close connection to local and global communities. This article intends to reveal the relevancy of MC Wire’s words by exhibiting how the Blueprint for Life program is uniting alternative forms of critical pedagogy with Hip Hop music and culture to give indigenous youth the opportunity to understand and rediscover their cultural heritage, participate in a process of long-term engagement that will cultivate community leadership, and discover their unique voice while engaging in creative dialogue with other youth on both the local and global level.

In her paper “Media and Marginalization,” American Critical Race theorist Malkia A. Cyril (2005) contends that youth, and particularly minority youth, are among the most demonized and marginalized section of our society. “In the media, the term ‘youth’ has become a coded mechanism to talk about race, and youth policy has become a way to legislate racism while using colorblind language” (p. 98). As a result, young men and women of colour find themselves in the precarious position of having few economic and political options while they are simultaneously identified as the instigators of violent crime and exploiters of the welfare system. These stereotypes are reinforced on countless occasions by television networks,

movie studios and news agencies by depicting young men and women of color as ignorant, violent, and harmful to the general public while their own image is constantly appropriated and exploited by corporations to sell products and further agendas through advertising campaigns (p. 98). As if this was not enough, young men and women of color are expected to accept these values as universal truths as they submit to their roles as passive consumers of media. Without the tools and resources to respond to these negative messages, young men and woman will continue to allow governments and corporations to represent both their image and their interests.

There are few youth with greater challenges in reclaiming their own image and identity than those of Canada's First Nations people; yet there are even fewer with more at stake. Achieving a modern indigenous voice is not an easy feat, as the terms of representation and appropriation have historically been controlled by the imperial center. Howard Adams (1991) highlights the significance of this issue in a Canadian context by identifying how Canada's imperial power structure has and continues to portray indigenous culture as "closed and static" (p. 36) at events like the Calgary Stampede where Aboriginal and Métis people

. . . present themselves as... a primitive culture, although they are performing in the 20th-century space age. Teepees are exhibited, tomahawks and primitive tools displayed, as if they were current implements and customs in Indian society... The Indian spectacle has no historical significance because the Calgary Stampede display is not a historical exhibition. (p. 36)

By marginalizing indigenous people as static and one-dimensional cultures of the past, many colonial powers have achieved a profound hegemonic control of the representation and evolution of First Nations and Inuit people that is far more representative of the imperial culture's perception rather than the indigenous culture itself. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick's *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (1999) parallels Adams' claim and explains that the imperial representation of Indigenous culture is deeply rooted in the idea of the colonial "frontier," where the indigenous subject "was presented as an obstacle to the civilizing of the continent, a stage in the evolution of human society that preceded agrarian development, which in turn would lead to full-fledged urban civilization." (p. 39) Kilpatrick further explains that by characterizing the indigenous people as savage and primitive, Euro-American and Canadian expansionism could be not only justified, but also glorified and romanticized.

When considering the countless obstacles facing young First Nations and Inuit men and women in terms of identity, history, economic, and social status it is understandable why so many indigenous youth have been drawn to the powerful messages of Hip Hop culture and the challenges it has posed to the current hegemonic power structures. In her groundbreaking critique of rap music, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose (1994) explains that Hip Hop

. . . began in the mid-1970s in the South Bronx in New York City... From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America. Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer and the narrator. Male rappers often speak from the perspective of a young man who wants social status in a locally meaningful way. They rap about how to avoid gang pressures and still earn local respect, how to deal with the loss of several friends to gun fights and drug overdoses, and they tell grandiose and sometimes violent tales that are powered by male sexual power over women. Female rappers sometimes tell stories from the perspective of a young woman who is skeptical of male protestations of love or a girl who has been involved with a drug dealer and cannot sever herself from this dangerous lifestyle. (p. 2)

While young Inuit men and women experience different geographical and cultural conditions from those of Hip Hop's founders, Rose's observations identify an intersection of concerns that young people in both cultures can share. These include issues surrounding racial and economic inequity, colonialism, gang violence, drugs, and many other issues that are a result of poverty and cultural hegemony.

What is most important, however, is the fact that young Inuit men and women's interest in Hip Hop culture demonstrates that there is a real need for them to connect with and relate to other young people from different geographical and cultural locations based upon their commonalities and similar interests. Their intercultural relationships are not based upon an imperialistic imposition of one culture's values over another, but rather reflect an alignment of similar interests that also embrace cultural and historical differences. In *Global Linguistic Flow* (2009), H. Samy Alim describes this global community "as the Global Hip Hop Nation, a multilingual, multiethnic 'nation' with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present" (p. 3). These communities are composed of disenfranchised youth from diverse religious, economic, and socio-political communities that use Hip Hop culture as a vehicle to answer back to the colonial empire that has sought to assimilate them. While this community is global in scope, each local community aims to "represent" its own unique flavour that strives to remain true to the customs and beliefs of its community while still remaining contemporary in its appeal to the current generation (Stavrias, 2005, p. 46).

Of course Hip Hop culture is not without its own challenges. Critics often point out that the music promotes materialism—"feeds on stereotypes and offensive language; it spoils with retrogressive views; it is rife with hedonism; and it surely doesn't always side with humanistic values" (Dyson, 2007, p. 21). While many of these concerns have some validity, Michael Eric Dyson points out that arguments such as these "demand little engagement with Hip Hop... [and] don't require much beyond attending to surface symptoms of a culture that offers far more depth and color when it's taken seriously and criticized thoughtfully" (p. 21). Dyson encourages people to look beyond the superficial stereotypes of Hip Hop culture that are

often perpetuated in the media and encourages artists, critics and educators to “dig deep into Hip Hop’s rich traditions of expression to generate criticism equal to the art that it inspires” (p. 26). Likewise, Carlson and Dimitriadis (2003) encourage critical educators to bring Hip Hop’s creative and subversive spirit into the classroom and engage with Hip Hop and popular culture in a way that not only embraces indigenous people’s strong interest in the culture, but also empowers them with “a sense that they are controlling their own representation, that they are in control of their own cultural identity, and are creatively shaping and molding language, style and self into something new” (p. 21) and relevant to their lives.

Dyson, Carlson, and Dimitriadis’s words parallel those of Paulo Freire and Ira Shor and reveal a discrepancy between the hegemonic curriculum that governs our current education system and the cultural, linguistic, political and economic dispositions of today’s youth. Shor (1987) explains, “the curriculum is not situated inside student thought and language” (p. 105) and the codified official curriculum results in a hegemonic imposition of thoughts and ideas that are not only irrelevant to the lives of young people, but often perpetuates the same imperialistic values and ideas that were used to conquer colonial subjects. Consequently, Inuit and First Nations students find it increasingly difficult to relate to the concepts found within the current school curriculum and, as the *National Strategy on Inuit Education* (2011) explains, are increasingly becoming more alienated as “roughly 75% of... [young men and women] are not completing high school, and... find that their skills and knowledge don’t compare to those of non-Aboriginal graduates” (p. 67). This current pedagogical dilemma requires northern educators and community leaders to take a step away from the demands of the curriculum and engage with youth on a level that is relevant to their daily experiences. More importantly, critical educators must resist the temptations that are set forth by the traditional “banking model” of education that aims to pacify learners and transform them into submissive receptacles that are to be filled with isolated and irrelevant facts (Freire, 1994, p. 52). Instead critical educators must engage young First Nations, Métis and Inuit men and women to become active learners and creators who can construct their own meanings and understandings through a process of advanced appropriation and subversion of popular media and culture that will be an effective form of reframing their lived experiences by pulling back some of the layers of hegemonic experiences and recognizing them as a process of development of a critical consciousness.

Blueprint for Life is one such program that has found considerable success by providing youth with the tools necessary to critically engage with popular culture and media in a way that is not only relevant to their unique circumstances, but also provides opportunities for youth to mentor, support and teach vital skills to one another in a manner that has resulted in considerable achievements. While the program itself is narrowly confined to facilitating workshops that focus on b-boy and b-girl dancing, graffiti art, music and fashion, the scope of the project is sig-

nificantly larger and allows youth the opportunity to become active and engaged creators by combining Hip Hop style with many of their indigenous traditions that have been affected through decades of colonization. Stephen Leafloor, the founder and chief organizer of the program, describes the significance of this process of hybridization by explaining,

It has been said that the youth of the North have lost their sense of identity—not knowing where they fit between the world of their historical traditions and the new realities they face with exposure to a modern world. We believe Hip Hop can be an adaptable cultural voice to help them define this.

Leafloor's assertion that Hip Hop music and culture "can be an adaptable cultural voice" to rediscover one's past is an important aspect to consider when understanding how bricolage and hybridity can function as a tool for educational and social change because it is important for the facilitator to not imperially impose any foreign values upon the youth. Instead, it must be a negotiation and collaboration of equal footing between the youth, their traditions, and the foreign conventions in order for an authentic process of recreating and rediscovering to take place. In the same sense, the facilitators must also have a strong understanding and resistance to reinforcing what Freire (1994) refers to as the traditional "banking" (p. 53) role that assumes that the teacher has all the answers to ensure that they are not replicating the same values that they are working to change. Leafloor confirms Blueprint For Life's dedication to the collaborative process by explaining "that the Blueprint team always humbles itself when in contact with another culture. We will explore together with... youth how they can be proud of who they are and find their own voice through their culture in Hiphop."

Leafloor's words demonstrate the Blueprint for Life program's dedication to the collaborative teaching process where both the educator and the students share the responsibilities of creative exploration. Dei (2002) explains this process as an organic interplay between teacher and student that must respect the traditions of the students while simultaneously "present communities as active, spiritual subjects, resisters and creators, not just victims of their own histories and experiences. Such collaborative teaching will attest to the power of identity and its linkage with/to knowledge production" (p. 129). Dei and Leafloor both remind us that a democratic and collaborative learning process must not bestow pity, sympathy or any wild aspirations of being the saviours of the students. Instead, the process needs to be built upon mutual respect of each party's customs and cultures while simultaneously keeping an open mind to identify opportunities for the cultural collaborations and intersections to take place. In spite of this, moving beyond the profound psychological impact of decades of colonialism is no easy feat and the Blueprint for Life team often experiences some resistance to rediscovering their cultural traditions from the students in the early stages of the collaborative process.

It's unfortunate, Leafloor says, referring to the First Nations youths' tendency to

diminish their own culture, but because we're perceived as superstars at doing this stuff, when we give them permission and say it's really cool when you create a human dog sled in the dance circle, or you simulate the Arctic sports, it's like these lights go off. 'Really? We could do that?' And then you should see the look of the elders. Many don't speak English but they're tickled pink that their grandchildren are laughing, having fun, and they see all this symbolism in their dance that represents their traditional culture (Saxberg, 2008).

Leafloor's words demonstrate that one of the biggest obstacles to the collaborative process is assisting youth in getting beyond the imperialist mindset that has sought to diminish indigenous cultures through generations of colonialism and reinforces the importance of offering a safe place for young men and women to play and negotiate between the cultural practices.

When considering the depth of the cultural hybridizations that have taken place between the Inuit youth and the Blueprint for Life staff, one can see that these collaborations are more of a creative process akin to a dialogue and discourse than an isolated creative project. Shor and Freire (1987) characterizes the nature of this discourse by explaining that in the collaborative pedagogical process information is shared like an object that "is put on the table between the two subjects of knowing. (namely the teacher and the student) They meet around it and though it for mutual inquiry" (p. 99) in an attempt to not only come to a mutual understanding but to share their unique experiences and understanding. In this sense, Freire (1994) explains that

. . . dialogue is the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study. Then, instead, of transferring the knowledge statically, as a fixed possession of the teacher, dialogue demands a dynamic approximation towards the object. (p. 100)

While much of the communication shared between the Blueprint for Life staff and the students is in the form of non-verbal communication based around dance and music, the communication process is no different than any verbal exchange as it still allows for the participants to meet and reflect on their current realities while they simultaneously partake in a creative discourse of making and remaking while concurrently fostering and developing healthy relationship with their fellow students based upon trust and mutual understanding. Additionally, these exchanges are dynamic and shift in context as quickly as any verbal exchange but are simultaneously rooted within the traditions of multiple cultures.

In order for young men and women to become fully engaged participants in the collaborative process, it is essential that the facilitators allow for an organic cross-cultural dialogue to take place. While Leafloor contends that many of the traditional "banking" approaches are employed during the early sessions, (Leafloor) the tables are quickly shifted as youth are encouraged to organically fuse many of their cultural traditions with their newly acquired skills. This is a time of great discovery, as the

students are encouraged to be creative during the bricolage process in the hopes of generating new ideas, techniques and conventions. The benefits of this process are twofold: Firstly, this is a time of great skill building and exposure to alternative points of view that challenge many of the misconceptions they may have. The facilitators of program have spoken in great detail about the lack of exposure to diverse media in rural aboriginal communities (Leafloor; Stavrias, p. 49) and workshops have a great opportunity to not only dispel myths about Hip Hop culture, but also expose youth to experiences that are often far removed from their own. Secondly, since bricolage requires every new creation to be a cross-cultural dialogue, aboriginal participants are given the opportunity to look at their own customs and traditions from a new perspective that is relevant to their interests. This often results in the youth discovering a deeper appreciation and understanding of their own culture and often leads to a resurgence in customs and practices that they may have initially thought to be irrelevant to their lives. Ultimately, the goal of this stage should be to allow the youth to examine, rediscover, and understand that they have a creative voice that matters on both the local and global level and in spite of their common feelings of isolation from the rest of the world, their discoveries can play a significant role in both their communities and in a global postcolonial dialogue.

Since the Blueprint for Life program can only work with communities for a limited time, it is extremely important that the program also makes a priority of engaging the entire community with the tools they need to sustain the program well after the Blueprint for Life staff have left. This begins with a community showcase where the community elders can begin to see some of the considerable shifts in the attitudes of the participants. Leafloor describes the significance of this showcase by explaining that

... the entire community turns out for the show, and elders grin when they see drumming, throat singing or traditional arctic games incorporated into the performance... you should see the look of the elders. Many don't speak English but they're tickled pink that their grandchildren are laughing, having fun, and they see all this symbolism in their dance that represents their traditional culture. (Saxberg, 2008)

The Blueprint for Life staff understands the importance of community in Inuit culture and demonstrates a commitment to real transformative change by engaging the entire community and its elders in the process. These roles can include anything from supervising rehearsals, offering transportation for the youth, giving insight into cultural traditions, financial assistance, sewing costumes or any other support that will allow for the activities to continue to engage and motivate the participants. Without these vital roles, many young people may feel overwhelmed by the demands of maintaining a project of this scale and may fall back into old habits. More importantly, however, Shilling (2002) describes the benefit of community engagement as a process of making the community whole again because it respects the Inuit people's collectivist traditions and "restores the individual to

the circle of community” (p. 156) in order to sustain the program and may play a pivotal role in the education of the younger generation.

While there are countless examples of bricolage and cultural hybridity that have occurred during the Blueprint for Life’s programs the following examples are some of the more significant occurrences that have led to the establishment of a unique brand of Inuit Hip Hop and the young men and women’s rediscovery of their own cultural traditions. Musically speaking, this include expressions such as “throat boxing,” which is a hybrid of Hip Hop’s “beat boxing” and traditional throat singing and often includes “sounds like the wind or different animals or different stories... [as] they freestyle back and forth off of each other” (Kelly, n.d.). In a social context, Leafloor explains, there are many traditional songs, dances, and athletic games in the Inuit culture that blend well with Hip Hop dancing because they require great skill, flexibility, concentration and athleticism. “The games are connected historically to passing the time during long winters in a large communal igloo, as a way of staying in shape and having fun. We use these culturally specific games to “flip the script” as they are the experts” (Thompson, n.d.) of these skills and teach the fundamentals to the Blueprint staff while simultaneously combining them with their newly learned skills. Additionally, the youth have exhibited great proficiency at combining their own visual art and fashion styles with Hip Hop culture to produce something very original. “The youth, Leafloor explains, work on a cultural graffiti piece with a powerful positive message that they want to communicate. We teach them basic technique, but the art is all theirs, often done in their traditional language and script.” “The youth are [also] encouraged to come up with their own arctic bling (jewellery) with things like a polar bear claw, or carving their name in graf letters out of caribou antler” (Thompson, n.d.). Finally, the collaborative process also gives youth the opportunity to explore and discover the importance of healthy conflict resolution that does not involve violence or aggression and can be applied to many different aspects of their lives. By this Leafloor explains that

Many Elders tell us that various aspects of their traditional culture seem directly in sync with the battles and the challenge aspects that exist in all the elements of Hip Hop culture. I have been told that drum dancing was used to settle disputes, as a challenge between two drummers, and that throat singing is a face to face challenge where one responds to the other person’s rhythms and sounds, and tries to trip up the other person or make them laugh.

While each of these cultural collaborations could easy stand on their own as a significant achievement of cross-culture collaboration and discourse, the combination of them and the continual creation of new ones everyday demonstrates the emergence of a new creative Inuit voice that is as equally immersed in a greater contemporary global context of Hip Hop and postcolonial discourse as it is within the Inuit’s traditional and sacred heritage.

One of the most noteworthy and inspiring instances of hybridity and bricolage

was created by the young men and women of the tiny community of Pond Inlet, Nunavut, who were able to combine the “something out of nothing” ethos of Hip Hop culture and the meagre resources around them to create a meaningful piece of art. Leafloor explains that after learning of the suicide of a community member, dozens of youth created their own form of creative expression that they called “frost graffiti” by using the warmth of their fingers to write positive messages about their friend on frosted walls and windows that was similar to that of graffiti tagging.

These kids went out around the whole town all night, feeling like they were accomplishing something positive and powerful together. When the sun came out and the town woke up, everyone was talking about it and walking around town to read all the powerful messages celebrating life and saying things about missing their friend. The whole town was covered in art and messages. (Leafloor)

What is most significant about the young men and women’s accomplishment at Pond Inlet is the fact that this creative and novel form of expression was created on their own without any support from the Bluepreint for Life staff and not only demonstrates a profound understanding of the spirit of Hip Hop and bricolage, but also demonstrates a reframing of consciousness similar to Mezirow’s “habits of mind” (2000 p. 21) where creative expression is used in a constructive manner to deal with issues of loss and grief.

While this discourse is certainly a validating and enlightening experience for the young Inuit men and women, perhaps the most empowering relationship develops through the global discourse that takes place through the act of bricolage. Leafloor describes the nature of this transglobal dialogue by explaining that

Despite the underbelly of real pain and anger often experienced by the youth in Canada’s North, there is still a strong passion to try new things, connect with the larger world, and scream out to everyone that they are here and that they count and that their voices are important. In many ways they feel like the rest of the world has forgotten about them and that they don’t count. What is pertinent here is that this sounds like how the youth in the early days of Hip Hop felt in the south Bronx. (2011)

In drawing parallels to the overwhelming sense of isolation and hopelessness that is shared by marginalized youth in Canada’s North and in the United States, Leafloor is able to touch upon a fundamental aspect of postcolonial discourse that, as Dei explains, aims to share a “knowledge of history, place, and culture [that] helps to cultivate a sense of purpose and meaning in life” (2002, p. 128). Stavrias, (2005) however, contends that Hip Hop also shares this desire to assert a local identity within the context of a greater global discourse through what he defines as its “internal logic” that is based around the three common characteristics of “sampling” (artistic appropriation), “representing” (embodying one’s community or roots), and “flow” (attitude or style) (p. 46) that are all dependent upon creating vast networks and styles that all share an important message of global consciousness and transglobal

discourse (Lipsitz, 1994, p.33). More importantly, these global networks of localized communities also represent a highly advanced system of Freire's dialogical method that aims to share skills, knowledge, and traditions of one local culture with the world. Freire explains the nature of this method by suggesting "dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it... Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality" (1994, pp. 98-99). While today's technology has opened up opportunities to connect with people from all around the world in an immediate way, the principles of Freire's dialogical method are still the same and has allowed opportunities for youth to become engaged in a dialogue that extends far beyond their own communities and allows them to connect with people and cultures from around the world that share their frustrations and aspirations.

In his book *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Politics of Place* (1997), George Lipsitz explains the significant role that indigenous traditions need to play in contemporary cultural practices.

... much that seems new in contemporary culture carries within itself unresolved contradictions of the past. The solutions to what seem like our newest problems may well be found in communities that have been struggling with them for centuries. The most 'modern' people in the world that is emerging may be those from nations that have been considered "backward." (p. 19)

Lipsitz's observations about cultures that are considered "backwards" is an important one to make when considering many of the common misconceptions regarding contemporary indigenous perspectives. Renee Shilling (2002) contextualizes this sentiment from a postcolonial perspective by explaining that the search for a contemporary and authentic indigenous voice is "part of [the] decolonization [process], which is the deconstruction of the changes since colonization and the ability to look critically at how it has impacted on our families, communities, and nations" (p. 152). More importantly, Shilling, Lipsitz, and many other critical pedagogues, including those working with the Blueprint for Life program, encourage First Nations, Inuit and Métis educators and students to embrace methods of creative learning that will "help heal the wounds... of colonization" (Shilling, 2002, p. 153) and resist the hegemonic representation of indigenous culture as primitive and static in order to issue in a new age of creative discovery that preserves and honors indigenous traditions while simultaneously revitalizing them with contemporary practices.

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