

# “Don’t Call Me Eskimo”<sup>1</sup>: Representation, Mythology, and Hip Hop Culture on Baffin Island

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*Abstract: Through a contextualization of the song, “Don’t Call Me Eskimo,” which was launched on the interactive website YouTube in 2007 and an analysis of three examples of hip hop culture drawn from her ethnographic fieldwork on Baffin Island in June/July 2008, the author makes the argument that hip hop culture in Nunavut enables a re-working of contemporary Inuit identity. As part of this re-working, Inuit youth mediate representations of themselves and their current lived experiences through mobile technologies and local networks, challenging common stereotypes and reified identities that continue to circulate in political, cultural, and national discourses.*

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## You Can’t Stop the Hip Hop!<sup>2</sup>

“You can’t stop the hip hop!” is a statement of significance and provocation – a declaration that has been professed to me (a hip hop scholar, researcher, facilitator, and enthusiast) by young people living both in the northern regions of Canada on Baffin Island and those living in southwestern Canada in the prairie provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. To understand the complex meaning(s) of this statement, one needs to consider the continually evolving mythology associated with hip hop culture along with the multiple and varied manifestations of the arts practices which continue to signify hip hop culture both in local and global contexts. As an entry point into a discussion of hip hop culture in Canada, I draw on this statement--“You can’t stop the hip hop!”--as a way to respond to the general reactions of many people whom I converse with about the existence and significance of hip hop culture among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth living within the borders of

Canada, and more specifically in the western and northern regions where my research is concentrated.

In the fall of 2008, I completed a chapter wherein I analyze media representations of masculinity, indigeneity, and gangsta' rap in Regina, Saskatchewan.<sup>3</sup> Within the context of gangsta' rap, and the hyped-up masculinity and criminality tied to representations of the 'hood, a typical response has been: "Yes, that makes sense" – an automatic acceptance of some sort of "inherent" connection between hip hop, gangs, and Aboriginal youth, more specifically Aboriginal men. When discussing my field trip to Baffin Island and my ongoing research concerning hip hop culture in the North however, I am consistently met with comments such as "really, hip hop happens there," surprise and then disbelief until some evidence of the thriving hip hop scene is offered up.

Such contradictory responses to these different locations suggests that Aboriginal youth culture in Canada is read within *at least* two very different, yet equally problematic racist and racialized frameworks which are partially based on geographical location. Aboriginal youth living in the urban centre of Regina, Saskatchewan, are identified through a colonialist lens most closely associated with a contemporary discourse on Aboriginal youth living in Canada as bodies in crisis – gang-affiliated, drug-addicted, linked to crime, prostitution, and poverty, or lacking in education, motivation, and initiative.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the young Inuit people of the North continue to be understood within a colonialist framework of reification – as bodies invested in "tradition," bound only to "traditional" ways of being in the world, isolated from the affects of colonialism, diaspora, globalization, and transnationalism.

From recent experiences of working with Aboriginal youth in these diverse communities, the culture of hip hop, including how hip hop is produced, performed, and consumed, signifies contemporary lived experiences of Aboriginal youth which are filtered through media technologies, as well as processes of globalization, capitalism, and cultural knowledge and practices. From this perspective the phrase, "You can't stop the hip hop," suggests a repositioning of the often problematic and clichéd representations used to make the connections between hip hop culture and Aboriginal youth living in Canada. Furthermore, it is this seemingly simple claim which enables a fracturing of the banal frameworks of reference mapped onto Aboriginal youth as discussed above, and which, instead, offers possibilities for an in-between, making apparent the intersections of local and global hip hop dialogues.<sup>5</sup>

To demonstrate how, and more importantly, to understand why the arts practices of hip hop are being adopted and adapted by Inuit youth living in Nunavut, I begin this article with a contextualization of aspects of hip hop culture in the North as represented by Arctic Bay's hip hop crew NWA (Northerns

With Attitude), and their music video for the song, “Don’t Call Me Eskimo,” which was launched on the interactive website YouTube in 2007. Following this I turn to three examples drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork on Baffin Island, where I visited Iqaluit (the capital of Nunavut and the urban centre of Baffin Island) and Pangnirtung (a fly-in community 3 hours north of Iqaluit) in June/July 2008. Similar to claims I have made elsewhere in relation to Aboriginal hip hop in Saskatchewan,<sup>6</sup> I argue, through an analysis of these examples, that hip hop culture in Nunavut enables a re-working of contemporary Inuit identity. As part of this re-working, Inuit youth mediate representations of themselves and their current lived experiences through mobile technologies and local networks, challenging common stereotypes and reified identities that continue to circulate in political, cultural, and national discourses. To account for the complexities of such claims, it is also critical to understand how and why hip hop culture and its arts practices are being used by community members (i.e., social and health care workers, government workers, and educators) for a variety of contradictory, yet also productive reasons - to connect with, regulate, discipline, and empower Inuit youth.

### Nunavut: “In the land of ice and snow”

Through the Nunavut Act signed on April 1, 1999, Nunavut became Canada’s third territory *and* its first self-governing territory. The largest of the territories, Nunavut takes up one third of Canada’s landmass, yet it is one of the most sparsely populated areas, with a total population of approximately 29,500 people. Iqaluit, the capital city of the territory, is located on Baffin Island and has a population of approximately 6,200 people (which signifies a doubling of the population since 1993). The Inuit population of Iqaluit makes up roughly fifty percent of the city which has dramatically transformed as industry, government, health, tourism, and mining initiatives have all increased in the past decade. A typical, smaller community in Nunavut is home to a population of five hundred to fifteen hundred people, generally ninety-five percent or more who self-identify as Inuit. In spite of growing infrastructure, communities are still physically isolated from one another in contemporary Nunavut. The extreme weather conditions year round, the lack of roads between communities, the distance of Baffin Island from the mainland, and the expense of transportation make travel in Nunavut difficult to negotiate. And yet, the increase of global communications media, specifically broadband technology (i.e., the internet), has assisted in creating greater connections and new forms of networking across communities, regions, and around the world. One only

has to browse through interactive sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, or YouTube to understand the value of this on-line territory as a space of social networking and a place to construct communities, especially in the North where mobility and physical access to anything outside one's community is difficult if not impossible. It is also in this on-line territory where Nunavut's hip hop culture has an important presence. To appreciate how such seemingly disparate trajectories are possible, one only has to turn to the music video for "Don't Call Me Eskimo," which as has been previously mentioned was launched on YouTube in 2007.<sup>7</sup>

### NWA's "Don't Call Me Eskimo"

Northerns With Attitude (NWA)'s 2007 rap video for the song "Don't Call Me Eskimo" was created and produced as part of the Arctic Bay Video Club Project. The club is one attempt to direct young peoples' attentions towards developing their skills in filming, editing, writing, audio software, and storytelling through the creation of videos. The club also contributes to the community's larger initiative to address social problems that many Inuit youth living in the North face, offering young people something to do and supporting creative outlets for youth to express their experiences, ambitions, concerns, and fears in a meaningful way. Although supervised by Ron Elliot, the club is primarily youth driven which helps to create enthusiasm and excitement around its projects, ranging from half-hour videos about life in Arctic Bay, to suicide prevention documentaries, or to three-minute music videos like "Don't Call Me Eskimo."<sup>8</sup>

Arctic Bay is on the northern part of Baffin Island and is called Ikpiarjuk which translates as "the pocket," a name derived from the landscape consisting of high hills surrounding the bay. Even the landscape suggests a sense of isolation. Located in the Qikiqtaaluk region, Arctic Bay has a population of approximately 700 Inuit residents. And similar to most other communities in Nunavut, it has twenty-four hours of darkness in the winter months, and twenty-four hours of daylight in the summer months. Winter weather is extremely cold and makes being outside difficult, limiting the kinds of possibilities for outdoor activities and play in the winter months.

Across Nunavut there are a number of social issues that young people face daily; high rates of suicide, drug/ alcohol abuse, depression, and family violence can create situations of paralysis, mistrust, and crisis for entire communities. These are some of the issues that the youth who participate in the Arctic Bay Video Club attempt to address in their artwork. Rather than pretending

that these difficult and often tragic issues do not exist, these young people present instead “real” experiences, offering meaningful contextualizations, as well as problematizing stereotypical representations of Inuit culture and Nunavut that continue to persist in the South. To do so, the youth draw on contemporary genres like hip hop as a way to keep young Inuit people interested in participating, and to reach a broad audience and connect to a global on-line hip hop dialogue that “tells it like it is.”

The music video for “Don’t Call Me Eskimo” offers a story of what life is like in Arctic Bay through its lyrics, music, and images. Using the non-diegetic sound effect of a needle being cued on a record, the music video immediately offers the audience a feeling of “hip hop authenticity,” contextualizing the rap by making connections to the technology of the turntables. There are a number of other important signifiers of hip hop throughout the music video. All of the characters are wearing typical hip hop style fashions (i.e., baggy jeans, big hoodies, ball caps, sneakers), and they use gestures associated with a conventional masculine hip hop performance. The status of the rapper is also exaggerated by his crew who are shown always positioned behind the rapper.

The song begins with a four-measure introduction, the first two bars presenting a simple and memorable melody on keyboards with the percussion setting a hip hop heavier feel in measures three and four. In the first few shots and with the beginning of the first verse, the audience is introduced to the rappers and crew, Bruce Paulousie, Don Oyukuluk, and friends, as well as some of Arctic Bay’s landscape and the town. Immediately, NWA begins to deconstruct stereotypes that are mapped onto Inuit people, culture, politics, and the North. In the first two lines colonial and imperialist practices of naming and claiming the land and its people are identified.

“The name Eskimo came from the British  
Who came here to look for gold, oil, and fish.”

The verse continues on and NWA self-identifies as “Inuit,” rapping about the practice of eating raw meat and the importance of surviving off the land. The rappers deconstruct the romanticized mythologies associated with the North, explaining that Inuit people now live in houses rather than igloos, that people party (and go clubbing), watch television, and wear shoes. They raise issues such as animal rights, hunting practices, liquor control, and debt, which are represented in the media as both “cultural” and controversial. Simultaneously unique forms of communication (i.e., facial gestures or raising eyebrows) are depicted calling into question the idea

that communication is dependent only on linguistics and spoken languages. NWA outlines both similarities and distinctions between Inuit peoples and people living around the world – making connections while simultaneously presenting characteristics that are unique to and representative of Inuit culture.

Throughout the music video, the audience is offered snapshots of the landscape as one of “ice and snow,” and this is particularly evident each time the chorus is sung:

“In the land of ice and snow  
 Don’t call me Eskimo  
 Black people aren’t negroes  
 Don’t call me Eskimo.”

The chorus takes on significance in multiple ways: first, Northerners with Attitude demand a change in how Inuit people are *identified*; second, Northerners with Attitude make an important *identification with* African Americans and the political struggles throughout history for emancipation from slavery, oppression, and the fight for equality; and third, Northerners with Attitude clearly *identify* how important language and culture are in the processes of political representation.

Not only have Northerners With Attitude made an obvious identification cross-culturally in the chorus, but one could easily make the argument that they have created a symbolic alliance with the African-American community through the use of the hip hop genre, and through the application of the acronym for Northerners with Attitude, N.W.A, which holds symbolic meaning in the hip hop world as it is the acronym of American gangsta’ rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitude). In their controversial rap albums N.W.A are known for reflecting “the brutal circumstances that define the boundaries within which most ghetto poor black youth in Los Angeles must live” (Dyson 2004:65). Both rap groups perform songs which reflect real life circumstances of the communities in which they live. And although there may not necessarily be many other similarities between the two groups, Northerns With Attitude have made, by drawing on the name, a strong political statement about the kind of hip hop politics they are engaged in. For Northerners with Attitude, the underlying meaning of “Don’t Call Me Eskimo” and the entire video production is about stimulating a discussion, challenging stereotypes, and contributing to a more productive narrative on contemporary Inuit life which includes both struggle and celebration.

Through images of play and humour-filled lyrics Northerners With

Attitude illustrate some of the difficulties for Inuit people, especially the youth, living in Nunavut today. Visually and lyrically they present the difficulty of skateboarding on snow or dirt roads, the lack of connections with school, compromised sleep patterns due to the extreme change in light, the high cost of living, and the lack of resources and support to assist with these problems. In the final verse, *Northerners With Attitude* discuss how many people turn to alcohol, drugs, violence, and suicide. Rather than ending the song here, *Northerners With Attitude* offer an alternative:

“We gotta listen to the ways of the Elders  
It’s the only way that our lives get better  
Let’s start everyday a struggle to survive  
We honour their memory by staying alive.”

The significance of this music video comes not only from its content, but also from the way it was presented to the world. Once “Don’t Call Me Eskimo” was launched on the YouTube site, the video was a success. Currently, the original post has over 63,000 hits, which does not include the number of times played from other posts and forwards from the site. What followed was a number of on-line discussions and commentary from people all over the world weighing in with comments on identity politics, the possibilities of reclaiming language used to oppress, the everyday in the North, and other socio-cultural and socio-political issues.

In the CBC short documentary produced focusing on the Arctic Bay Video Club in 2008,<sup>9</sup> the reporter made the insightful comment, “Combine basic skills and an internet connection and you have a powerful way of talking to others.” Interactive media and mobile technologies do offer possibilities for dynamic interactions with people all over the world. Video Club supervisor, Ron Elliott, suggests, “They use Bebo, they use Facebook, so they’re communicating with people all over Canada and some around the world. [...] and now they’re starting to realize that video is a way to talk about things they talk about in their small groups.”<sup>10</sup> For a group of young people who are geographically isolated from the community in closest proximity, the use of these technologies and cultures such as hip hop represent powerful and empowering possibilities for network building and community development. At the same time, it is also important to consider the complexities of how these new on-line connections, networks, and communities are re-defining the world, both locally and globally.

## Hip Hop and its Many Contradictions

Hip hop culture is burdened by contradiction. On one hand, hip hop culture is portrayed by western mass media as a culture reliant on gender and racial stereotypes, heteronormative codes of desire, and overly romanticized capitalist narratives of conflict and excess – the bling, the booty, typical representations of the ‘hood, and signifiers of a hyper heterosexual hip hop masculinity. In contrast, hip hop culture is also represented by some artists, cultural critics, and fans as a politics of resistance – a culture founded on narratives and experiences of emancipation, reclamation, and revolution – a “keepin’ it real” sort of politic. And yet, in recent years hip hop culture has also become institutionalized in DJ academies, dance classes, community arts organizations, high schools, colleges and universities.<sup>11</sup> This has been viewed by participants of the culture as both a legitimization and a de-legitimization of hip hop. The legitimacy angle is drawn in the form of recognition of the arts practices associated with hip hop culture as being valuable and “worthy” of study in a formal institution, whereas the critical, social and political significance of hip hop has historically been (and continues to be) tied to its mythology as a culture associated with the streets, the ‘hood, the ghetto, and those subjects who live in or are representative of these marginalized spaces.

In North America hip hop and its associated arts practices (DJ/Beatmaking, Rapping, Breakdancing, and Graffiti Arts) are a common focus for education-based projects targeted towards youth who are deemed to be “at risk” – at risk of not finishing school, at risk of “getting into trouble” with the law or at home or in their communities, and generally, “at risk” of becoming undesirable citizens (Foucault 1980). Within a Canadian context these programs/ projects/workshops are commonly found in inner city schools facilitated by community-based arts organizations, social justice groups, and/or municipal/provincial/territorial initiatives targeted towards vulnerable and “at risk” youth.<sup>12</sup> And yet in spite of the liberal approach to inclusivity often found at the center of such programs, and the explicit and implicit emphases on creating “responsible,” “healthy” and “productive” citizens, many young people who become involved with hip hop culture through such programs develop new and/or different artistic ways to tell alternative narratives of lived experience, politics, and revolt, at times resisting the neat category and creation of what Foucault refers to as the docile citizen (Foucault 1977, 1978). Even though the primary objectives of the governing bodies that finance and bring programs like these into the communities are generally tied to a discourse of “health,” “well-being,” and responsible citizenship, young



Inuit people are learning, through hip hop artistic practices and politics, new strategies to engage with the world in which they live in critical and creative ways.

## Hip Hop as Cultural Practice in the North

Hip hop culture and its associated cultural practices are visible throughout Nunavut. From the hip hop fashions, gestures, vernacular, its contradictory politics centered around capitalism and the capitalist desiring machine (Deleuze & Guattari 1977) and a social consciousness of reclamation and resistance, to graffiti arts and tags, to spontaneous or rehearsed break and hip hop dance performances, to the images and sounds of rap wars on Bebo sites, hip hop culture is relevant to the lives of young people living in Nunavut. In fact, while I was in Iqaluit and Pangnirtung conversing informally with people about hip hop culture, a question I was repeatedly asked was, “You know that Clyde River is the hip hop capital of Baffin Island, don’t you?”<sup>13</sup>

The very idea that there is a “hip hop capital” on Baffin Island suggests to me that there are at least three important things to consider: first, young people all over Nunavut are participating in hip hop culture, but for some reason, the hip hop scene happening in Clyde River has created a buzz which is recognized across the territory; second, this distinction surrounding Clyde River speaks to how meaning is constructed through genre and mapped onto space and place (Forman 2004); and third, the construction of place identity in this way also reveals a politics associated with naming and claiming, leading to a politics which has been mythologized within hip hop culture history (east coast/ west coast) and the development of specific signifiers that create distinct regional hip hop sounds or identities. Constructing place identity through music making is not a new phenomenon; with hip hop that exists outside of a mainstream North American context however, the emphasis on naming and claiming represents a signifier of authenticity. And yet as Bennett suggests, “the localization of hip hop, rather than being a smooth and consensual transition, is fraught with tensions and contradictions as young people attempt to reconcile issues of musical and stylistic authenticity with those of locality, identity and everyday life” (Bennett 2004:180). How these tensions and contradictions are negotiated and ultimately reconciled is what calls into question the common claim that global hip hop is simply about mimicry and “an exotic and derivative outgrowth of an African-American owned idiom” (Mitchell 2002:1-2). The rise in popularity of hip hop culture in Nunavut (and among Aboriginal youth living all over Canada) can be better understood if

read within a broader context of how and why hip hop has been appropriated or adopted, and adapted by young people all over the world.

Drawing on a number of hip hop scholars' works, as well as my own theorizing about hip hop culture in Saskatchewan, I have argued that "young people from all around the world with diverse cultural, social, economic, and political backgrounds are drawn to hip hop because the culture allows for a confluence of a multitude of national, regional, and cultural sensibilities with its aesthetics, styles, and pleasures."<sup>14</sup> I have also made the claim that the culture of hip hop offers multiple entry points: rapping, writing rhymes, beat-making, beat-boxing, graffiti, DJing, and break or hip hop dancing. For many of these arts practices, one does not need formalized training; in fact, hip hop cultures all over the world pride themselves on their DIY sensibilities. It is this kind of open-ended-ness that allows for the merging of local vernaculars, cultural practices, and styles. For young people living in Nunavut, hip hop has become a medium (space/ place) to connect practices read and understood as both "traditional" and "contemporary" Inuit culture with recognized global cultures.

### Local/ Global Interconnections: New Forms of Hip Hop

While visiting Iqaluit and Pangnirtung I was presented with many examples indicating the significance of hip hop as a culture that promotes both the uniqueness of the North and Inuit youth culture, while simultaneously representing Inuit youth as young people who actively connect with and are influenced by popular cultural forms and global communications. Prior to flying into Pangnirtung from Iqaluit, I contacted one of the people (youth coordinator Chris Heide) responsible for coordinating a hip hop club which had developed following a week-long hip hop workshop facilitated by Stephen Leafloor (a.k.a. Buddha) and his BluePrintForLife team of young people.<sup>15</sup> During our conversation I enquired about the best possible methods of contacting the youth in the club in order to ask if they would be interested in meeting me and informally discussing their thoughts on hip hop. It was at this point that he suggested that I come to the youth/visitor's centre and from there the youth that wanted to talk about hip hop would come. Indeed this was my experience. After a tour of the youth centre and a walk through downtown, a small gathering of youth who were involved in the hip hop club (along with some who did not participate in the club) arrived to meet us and find out more about why my research assistant and I had come to their town.

## Throat-Boxing - A New Form of Hip Hop

During a short visit to Pangnirtung, I met a number of young people who participated in the hip hop club, enjoyed listening to hip hop, and engaged in the different arts practices. At one point two of the young women that had come to meet us, B-Girl Snap and B-Girl Annie, asked if they could demonstrate a new concept that they had been working on. Making the request to have the audio recorded, the two women faced each other and B-Girl Annie began throat singing. Soon B-Girl Snap joined B-Girl Annie and began beat-boxing. Beat-boxing is often considered the fifth element of hip hop. B-Girl Annie and B-Girl Snap continued to collaborate and create the piece until one of the girls began to laugh, a common practice signifying the end of a throat singing performance. What these young Inuit women demonstrated was a new cultural practice - the practice of what was referred to as throat-boxing, a synthesis of the Inuit cultural practice of throat singing and the hip hop cultural form of beat-boxing.<sup>16</sup>

## The Ubiquitous Nature of Graffiti Arts

Graffiti has long been recognized as one of the primary elements of hip hop culture. From simple tags to complex pieces that take up entire walls, graffiti is an important and often highly political arts practice. Contemporary graffiti arts practices, or what graffiti is generally known as today, were developed in the 1970s when artists like Taki 183 began to write (or tag) his name on walls in subway stations and on train cars in New York City. The mythology of graffiti is founded on the premise that graffiti was “an artistic battle against the power brokers in society and a breakaway from poverty and the ghetto” (Gantz 2009:8). Ironically, however, as graffiti and graffiti writing gained popularity, the tagging became embedded within a capitalist narrative of bigger and better. Tags spread to harder to reach or more “dangerous” places, and a graffiti artist’s credibility became linked to the number of tags or the larger, more difficult (often more time consuming and ultimately more dangerous) pieces. As graffiti took off in New York City, then Mayor John V. Lindsay began to spearhead an anti-graffiti campaign, publicly attacking graffiti artists and claiming that those responsible were mentally ill.<sup>17</sup>

Today, although still highly controversial in many locales, graffiti still plays a significant role in hip hop even on Baffin Island. While I saw a number of simple tags when I was in both Iqaluit and Pangnirtung, the tag on the wall of the fire station/city hall in Iqaluit is an incredibly large and detailed work.

Unlike the typical graffiti letter-based style, this wall encompasses multiple pieces with both realistic and fantastical characters that represent life and stories in Nunavut. Historically “letters used to dominate [graffiti] but today the culture has expanded” (Ganz 2009:7). As is evident in the graffiti work from Iqaluit, “new forms are explored, and characters, symbols and abstractions have begun to proliferate ... Personal style is free to develop without any constraints, and stickers, posters, stencils, airbrush, oil-based chalk, all varieties of paint and even sculpture are used” (Ganz 2009:7).

The graffiti piece in Iqaluit was created by Celina Kalluk with artists Jonathan Cruz and Patrick Thompson and began in 2006.<sup>18</sup> Each year the work is added to, resulting in a growing, fluid and ongoing story. The work itself consists of multiple images that are reminiscent of the North and Inuit culture and yet, the colour schemes and artistic style of the works are definitely drawn from the culture and history of graffiti. When viewing the entire wall, each new addition to the overall piece is obvious; each section is distinct or can be regarded independently, but each contributes to the whole piece, articulating a larger narrative of storytelling, identity, and culture. Four images from the



Figure 1. Graffiti piece, Iqaluit Fire Hall. Faces, Animals ... (Photo by author. Used with permission)



Figure 2. Graffiti piece. Iqaluit Fire Hall. Polar Bear ... (Photo by author. Used with permission)

wall are represented here (Figures 1-4). From right to left, the images offer an igloo on top of a kamotiit (sled) surrounded by and infused with faces, animals, light, and the head and shoulders of smiling Inuit women.

The next panel is a polar bear with light coming off him, with a sleeping goddess wrapped in tentacles floating above. This image is beside and immersed in an Inuit man fishing in the open Arctic waters with landscape pictured all around which then leads into the image of two women engaged in an expressive dialogue, showing the spirit of sharing, light, and power representing the tradition of throat singing.

Beside this is the image of a whale with two bodies entangled on its back or in its belly. The whale's horn flows into the next panel – a picture of an Inuit woman, an elder holding the earth and illustrating the midnight sun. And only in its beginning stages (as of July 2008), a wolf looks back over its shoulder staring at the woman. From these images and the integration of arts practices, cultural symbols, and systems of meaning making, it is evident that graffiti arts are also an important medium for young people as they attempt to think in





Figure 3. Graffiti piece. Iqaluit Fire Hall. Throat Singing ... (Photo by author. Used with permission)



Figure 4. Graffiti piece. Iqaluit Fire Hall. Whale ... (Photo by author. Used with permission)

innovative ways about their current lives, as well as their histories.

## Storytelling and Myth-Making in Breakdance

This kind of innovation was also evident when breakdance crew Kaiva performed on stage at the 2008 Alianait Festival in Iqaluit. Led by Lil Bear (Christine) who moved to Iqaluit from Ottawa, Kaiva is comprised of a diverse group of youth who live and practice their art in Iqaluit. For the 2008 festival performance, four of Kaiva's dancers presented a twelve-minute performance incorporating conventional breakdance choreography, Inuit cultural practices, and narratives of everyday life in Nunavut. The performance included contemporary practices of storytelling and a young generation of storytellers that offer new points of reference from which to speak or dance. When asked about the creation of the piece, Lil Bear explained, "Kajusiniq (continuum) was created for the 2007 Canada Winter Games in Whitehorse" but prior to the games, "it was first performed at the Iqaluit Legion to get feedback from community members" (Interview with Lil Bear, summer 2008). The soundtrack of the piece is a synthesis of different tracks and diverse musical genres produced by Geronimo Inutiq (Nimo or DJ Mad Eskimo) in consultation with Lil Bear and the Kaiva dancers. Throat singer Marie Belleau is featured prominently throughout the mix, as are the sounds of seals, ducks, the wind, and the Inuit drum.

The entire soundtrack is accompanied by an overarching narrative about life in the North. From walking through a blizzard to playing Inuit games to slumbering in deep sleep, to rebirth and to a jig, the dancers bring these stories to life through their movements. Approximately seven minutes into the performance, the dancers rapidly transition from a folk-style jig into a breakdance move known as an L-kick freeze. At this point in the choreography, the dancers morph into a dogsled team on the land and begin to dig in the snow, mimicking the search for seals. Next the dogsled team transition into humans, discovering a boat and beginning to row as they hunt for seal. Once they spot the seal (the dancer who drove the dogsled team now becomes the seal), they attempt to kill it with their harpoons three times before the seal is finally caught. Throughout this process the seal dancer demonstrates skilled footwork reminiscent of the foot work seen in a breakdance cypher. The footwork is fast, and demonstrates the dancer's technical skills, all the while creating tension and anticipation which is integral to the hunt. As the others celebrate their catch, the seal is reeled in and is cut open at which point a dancer is released from the seal's stomach. This emergence leads the group into their final free-

style where each dancer gives the last of what he's got until the song runs out.

When I asked about the breakdance steps and the overall choreography of the performance, Lil Bear suggested,

The dance steps were chosen to suit everyone's ability while sharing moves that we each had to teach others so we could add them to the routines. The dancers had many opportunities to highlight their particular style in the freestyle segments. The creative process was a collaboration with dancers and the assistant choreographer Jonathan Cruz aka B-boy Blaze. I was the director and head choreographer. The youth dancers were consulted with all the sections and were asked for feedback throughout. They helped in guiding us in making sure that the movements were more suitable to the actual Inuit culture as they knew it to be. (Interview with Lil Bear, summer 2008)

It is important to note that in order to create the performance, both the dance movements and the soundtrack were made in a collaborative process with input from the dancers. Lil Bear herself is not Inuk, nor are all of the dancers born in Nunavut, so this collaborative process is integral to the overall piece and to the way the community interprets and reacts to Kaiva's performance.

As soon as Kaiva was introduced, the young children in the audience enthusiastically rushed to the front of the stage. It was obvious from their cheers and their dance moves that these children were into hip hop and acrobatic dance moves. This became even more evident during one of the performances by a singer songwriter when she invited all the children to come on to the stage and dance as she sang her final number. As the artist sang the children began to breakdance, a form of dancing that definitely did not "match" the song or the genre that she was singing. Prior to this invitation, the young female audience members were sitting in chairs in the front row while the young boys were practically glued to the stage demanding attention and calling out in the middle of songs. Once on stage, however, the young girls moved to the front and the boys kept to the back. Not only did the young girls take center stage, but they were incorporating acrobatic break moves that are often gendered as masculine.

From this example, there are a couple of things to note: first, although hip hop is often a genre that is gendered masculine and dominated by men, these young children worked both within and against these stereotypes. While seated in the audience, the children respected the conventions played out, but once on stage they not only resisted the norms, but the young girls completely



challenged them by moving to the front of the stage and performing acrobatic breakdance moves. Second, Lil Bear's leadership of Kaiva and her own breakdance style, which consists of the more acrobatic, difficult, and strength demanding break moves, have obviously had an impact on what dance moves and styles are being taken up and by whom. She has become a role model for these young girls.

## Conclusion

In the preface to her book *Native American Music in Eastern North America* (2007), Beverly Diamond makes the case "for a better understanding of the ways past traditions inform contemporary indigenous life" (xiv). In the examples that I have offered here, we hear and see the adoption of hip hop culture and its arts practices. There is indeed a reworking of the art forms, but not just to include local culture; rather, these adaptations speak to a nuanced way of performing and critically engaging with experiences being lived by these young people today. It speaks to how they are choosing to tell their stories, which does not always translate into being a docile citizen as understood within the framework of capitalism.

At the same time I do not wish to appear to understand or read hip hop cultures in the North as only unproblematic. Inuit youth are drawn to hip hop and all of its capitalist desires and provocations – the bling, the self-assured attitude, the disputes of territory, the contest of talent and wit, the fashion, the sexuality, the vernacular, the hyper-masculinity representing problematic power relations and effects of colonial discourses, the cool factor, all being very seductive especially because of how they are mediated. From the stories I was told, along with what I witnessed on my first trip to Iqaluit and Pangnirtung, it seems that the modes of identification are changing and Inuit youth are now identifying with a cultural form that is representative of other experiences of systemic poverty, racism, oppression and a culture that is at times a symbol of resistance, reclamation, and political action for many local cultures globally.

From the perspective of governing bodies, health and wellness organizations, community officials, elders, and community members in Nunavut, hip hop has become an important strategy to engage with, reach, and productively challenge young people. For many young people (as well as other community members), hip hop has become a place to begin to dialogue about current crises within their communities – fractures in relationships, social problems including drug addictions, depression, alcoholism, poverty, high rates of sui-

cide, crime, cultural trauma, environmental degradation, global warming, and ongoing legacies of colonialism. And notably, hip hop has also become a way to voice past and current lived experiences, a means to challenge stereotypes, a method for re-establishing relationships between youth and elders, a space to enact celebration, and a cultural practice that illustrates an important relationship between the local and global as well as the past, present and future in Nunavut. ❁

## Notes

1. Song title, Arctic Bay Video Club (2007).
2. I gratefully acknowledge that my research on hip hop culture in western and northern Canada is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canada Research Chair program, the Canada Foundation for Innovation, and the University of Regina.
3. See Marsh (forthcoming in Ramsay 2011) "Keepin' it Real?: Masculinity, Race, and Media Representations of (Gangsta') Rap in Regina."
4. For a more detailed analysis see Marsh (forthcoming in Ramsay, 2011).
5. For a contextual discussion of the politics of local/ global relations in hip hop culture outside of the U.S., see Mitchell (2002).
6. See Marsh (forthcoming in Hoefnagels and Diamond) "Bits and Pieces of Truth: Storytelling, Identity and Hip Hop in Saskatchewan."
7. To see the video for "Don't Call Me Eskimo" go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS8RZcKQwBA>
8. For more information please see the short documentary produced by *CBC Television* in 2008 at <http://blogforyouthstudies.blogspot.com/2008/09/doc-on-dont-call-me-eskimo.html>.
9. To see the CBC short documentary go to [http://www.cbc.ca/aboriginal/2007/11/arctic\\_bay\\_video\\_club/](http://www.cbc.ca/aboriginal/2007/11/arctic_bay_video_club/)
10. To view the documentary: <http://blogforyouthstudies.blogspot.com/2008/09/doc-on-dont-call-me-eskimo.html>
11. I also implicate myself here as someone who both researches and teaches hip hop culture in the university classroom, and as the creator and Director of the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs at the University of Regina. For more on the IMP Labs Hip Hop Projects, community hours, research, outreach and education community-based programming see [www.interactivemediaandperformance.com](http://www.interactivemediaandperformance.com). For commercial examples institutionalizing hip hop, see the Scratch DJ Academy located in New York City, Los Angeles, and Miami (<http://www.scratch.com>) and the Scratch Labs located in Toronto (<http://www.scrachlab.ca>).
11. See Lashua (2006) as well as Marsh (2009).
12. Clyde River is a community on the northeast side of Baffin Island with a

population of 802 people (as reported in the 2006 census).

13. See Marsh forthcoming in Hoefnagels and Diamond.

14. BluePrintForLife is an organization that is founded on the belief that hip hop arts practices coupled with social work can enhance the lives of youth. More specifically, the project implements in-depth, intense, week-long hip hop programs with the goal to enhance youth development, address local youth issues and, provide resources for program sustainability within the community.

15. To hear the field recording of B-Girl Snap and B-Girl Annie throat-boxing go to the mix tape on [www.interactivemediaandperformance.com](http://www.interactivemediaandperformance.com) and play "Throat-boxing".

16. See Castleman (1982) for a detailed article chronicling the anti-graffiti campaign in New York City.

17. See Lisa Gregoire's article in *Canadian Geographic* January/ February 2009.

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