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Brett Lashua

Karen Fox

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Brett Lashua PH.D.^a & Karen Fox PH.D.^b

^a School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University Wales, Wales, United Kingdom

^b University of Alberta Edmonton, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

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Rec Needs a New Rhythm Cuz Rap Is Where We're Livin'

BRETT LASHUA, PH.D.

School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
Wales, United Kingdom

KAREN FOX, PH.D.

University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada

This research presents an autoethnographic strategy for self-reflection by sharing stories consistent with Indigenous methodologies and establishing a frame for re-mixing leisure theory. As an autoethnographic study, we reflect on how we have been engaged, changed, and challenged to rethink understandings of leisure and ourselves as leisure scholar-practitioners as a result of listening to rap music, especially composed by Aboriginal young people. We pause on questions related to how Aboriginal young people challenge leisure theory and its relevance to their lives through their rap and hip hop performances.

Keywords leisure, rap music, Aboriginal, autoethnography, qualitative methods

“A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song”
— Maya Angelou

In this paper we discuss the importance of *listening* to the lyrical stories of rap songs that young people create, and *listening* as vulnerability to the radical alterity of the other (Burggraave, 2002; Dudiak, 2001). We reflect on how we have been engaged, changed, and challenged to *rethink our understandings of leisure and ourselves as leisure scholar-practitioners* as a result of listening to rap music especially composed by Aboriginal young people.

In Canada, the designation and representation of Aboriginal people have historically been controlled by the government. Resources and media exposure typically focus on issues around status, land claims, and deficits such as poor health, lack of education, and dysfunctional families. Such classifications are based on geographical and genetic identification markers as well as presumed dominant Franco-English Canadian norms and values. Metis people, on the other hand, are left invisible by such classifications because they are not geographically located and contain “mixed blood.” Furthermore, Aboriginal people who

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Address correspondence to Karen Fox, Ph.D., E-431 Van Vliet Centre, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2H9, Canada. E-mail: karen.fox@ualberta.ca

move to urban areas are often left outside of Band¹, mainstream or governmental services. Within urban communities, the largest growing population of Aboriginal people, especially the young, are in urban areas.

Over the past decade, rap has become the preferred music for many Aboriginal youth (Efron, 2001). Rapping and writing rap lyrics are powerful forms of storytelling. Raps are stories told through music and performance (Dimitriadis, 2001c; Rose, 1994). Similarly, the layers and textures of a song (e.g., beats and melodies) are capable of conveying evocative stories or narratives. Each musical note, beat, and voice is meaningful in part because of its own tone and texture and carries meaning because of its *relation* to other *different* rhythms and voices. In the same way, we as human beings learn about ourselves through our relations to what is different and similar to us. Learning requires responsiveness and vulnerability to “strangeness” and willingness to acquire new habits, or at least to question the habits we have (Orlie, 1994). Along these lines, Grossberg (1994) noted, “The central issue, then, is not one of merely acknowledging difference; rather, the more difficult question concerns the kind of difference that is acknowledged and engaged” (p. 13). This paper presents *our personal autoethnographic accounts* as a type of composition relating how we engaged with rap music of the everyday lives of urban Aboriginal youth, how we listened to the different voices of young people involved in our research, and how we reflected on the presence of our own voices and listening practices.

Additional resonance and dissonance emerge as these engagements challenge our ways of conducting and writing research and thinking about theory. That is, the ways that we are able to do research shape the kind of researchers we are capable of being and becoming (Richardson, 1997). Are stories important to leisure research? Are rap music and popular culture valuable areas of leisure for young people? If so, how are we engaged by these stories, songs, and young people?

Our accounts offer a limited representation of our research at Boyle Street Education Centre (BSEC), an inner city charter school in Edmonton, Alberta, that seeks to re-engage “at risk” and out-of-school youth in educational processes. *The Beat of Boyle Street* is a recreational music program for urban youth, ages 14 to 20 years, predominantly of Aboriginal heritage, attending BSEC. The songs, voices, lyrics, and stories that are created remind us of the struggles that these young people must contend with on a daily basis. The autoethnographic stories of our involvement in this project share our experiences as qualitative researchers who were challenged in doing arts-based research through learning about and co-producing leisure with Aboriginal youth making rap music.

Urban Aboriginal Rap Music

For many Aboriginal young people and particularly those living in poverty in the inner city, rap music has become an important expression of political and social struggles around Aboriginal-Canadian culture and identity (Efron, 2001; Hollands, 2004). Some forms of rap music provide expressive means of survival, camaraderie, community, and joy (Dimitriadis,

¹Indian and Northern Affairs of the Government of Canada explains Bands as: “a group of First Nation people for whom lands have been set apart and for whom money is held in trust by the Crown. A band can also be a group or band of Indians that the Governor in Council has declared to be a band under the *Indian Act*. Each band has its own governing council, usually consisting of one or more Chiefs and several Councillors who are either elected or chosen through traditional custom. The members of a band generally share common values, traditions, and practices rooted in their ancestral heritage. Today, some bands prefer to be known as First Nations. There are currently 614 bands” (Retrieved December 3, 2005, from www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/or/info/info125_e.html).

2001a). Rap music, like poetry, speaks more than it means (Norris, 1996) and occupies a paradoxical cultural space through which some kinds of knowledge and identities are enabled while others are limited or denied. This space is characterized by struggles over questions of who can say what, in which circumstances, and with what power (Kelly, 2004). Rose (1994) argued that rap music is one way that young people are contesting and deploying power through narrative:

Rap is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless. On this stage, rappers act out inversions of status hierarchies, tell alternative stories of contact with police and the education process, and draw portraits of contact with dominant groups in which the hidden transcript inverts/subverts the public, dominant transcript. (p. 101)

Although a problematic cultural practice, rap music draws attention to the complexities of urban life for marginalized people (Mahiri & Conner, 2003). In doing so, rap offers possibilities for counter-hegemonic perspectives particularly through the views and voices of urban youth. Lipsitz (1994) argued:

Our discussions of youth culture will be incomplete if we fail to locate them within the racialized crisis of our time, but our understanding of that crisis will be incomplete if we fail to learn the lessons that young people are trying to teach through their dance, dress, speech, and visual imagery. (p. 19)

Young people can teach through rap music and engagements with wider hip-hop culture². As scholar-practitioners, we are deeply imbricated in the social, racial, economic, and political relations and contexts. We need consistently to critically reflect and position ourselves in relation to constructions of self-other relationships (Fine, 1998). Attending to the effects and consequences of our engagements with youth hip-hop cultures, we asked: how and where two white educated middle-class adults in positions of leadership and “authority” begin to interact within the worlds of urban Aboriginal hip-hop?

The “Contact Zone”

Pratt (1991) used the phrase “contact zone” to describe the spaces where people of different cultures grapple, collide, or struggle over meaning and power. In ethnographic terms, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) noted that “boundary spanning” is necessary in attempts to study and work with groups in cultures that are not similar to our own. For us, simply approaching the site of the research represented moments for us to reflect on issues of difference.

[Karen] As I walk into Boyle Street Community Co-Op, I pass men, women, young people smoking and hanging out. Mostly they look at each other, catching glimpses as I walk by. No eye contact, no holding doors open for each other, no words. Within a block of city hall, shopping areas, and business offices, I have

²Hip hop has four “traditional” elements: Emcee-ing (rapping), breakdancing (B-Boy/B-Girl), DJ-ing (turntablism), and graffiti art. Thus the culture around hip-hop is constructed intertextually. In *The Beat of Boyle Street*, participants often used the terms “rap” and “hip-hop” generically and interchangeably particularly when “rap” is a subset of hip-hop. Krims (2000) provided a concise summary (p. 10–12) of the debates around differences between “rap” and hip-hop.” See Lashua (in press) for a more complete description of the research with *The Beat of Boyle Street*.

entered another world where different rules apply, and I am the outsider. I want to show them respect but am acutely aware that my elite, educated social practices shout power and privilege. They call me to respond, but I must learn a new rhythm and greeting. When I leave, I watch an Aboriginal man slowly and carefully walk across the street, making a police car with lights and sirens wailing stop and wait for him. Resistance is alive and well.

[**Brett**] I sense a world of difference when I enter the community Co-Op and work with the young people there. On my first day of the project, students set up a CD player in the pool table/recreation area after lunch and performed traditional Aboriginal dancing to “powwow” music while others were playing pool. Then they switched over to rap music and started breakdancing. Most students were wearing extra-baggy hip-hop clothes and have homemade tattoos all over their hands and arms, one of which proclaims “THUG” on one arm, with a spirit circle tattooed on the other. How do these cultures—Aboriginal and urban hip-hop—mix, and *how do I mix in?* As I sat and watched the dancing, I felt like I was on another planet.

The Beat of Boyle Street challenged our understandings of recreation provision. Walker and White (1998) and Witt (2002) talked about the role of “supportive adults” in the lives of young people. Although in general terms we conceive of ourselves as encouraging of and listening to rappers, b-boys, and b-girls (breakdancers), we are uneasy about the differences in values, cultures, and power we represent. In addition, we can find no literature to help us understand what is “positive” and culturally appropriate development for urban Aboriginal youth who are resisting racism, oppression, and the lingering effects of residential schools, and who are desiring to carve out a future connected to Aboriginal traditions but relevant to the modern world. First, we listened and participated in their music and desires instead of imposing a recreation program with prescriptive services and outcomes. Then when we learned their rhythms, we began to see processes of “mixing in” or “remixing” and “mashing up” as vital ways to engage with, listen to, and learn what young people had to say about their lives through their musical stories.

[**Karen**] The term “mash up” now resonates deeply with me. To mash up is to put together two seemingly disparate songs to form a new composition—think of a combination of Elvis Presley and dance star Junkie XL (“A little less conversation”) or the rapper AKON’s “Mr. Lonely” remixed with a sped up 1960s Bobby Vinton vocal sample that sounds like Alvin and the Chipmunks. Now think of a middle aged, privileged, white woman who loves the blues and classical music, who can’t clap in time, and who can’t carry a tune, “mashed up” with young, Aboriginal men and women who can spontaneously rap messages on my phone, who compose rhyming lyrics about commodification, racism, suicide, violence, Aboriginal culture, and hope, and can “successfully” live on the streets on their own. To some extent, musical mash ups echo larger process of cultural mash ups, bringing different aspects of identities and cultures together to form a new composition, a *remix*.

Research as Mash Up: Call and Response, Ethnography and Autoethnography

In a style similar to a mash up, our narratives operate as a type of metaphoric “*pas de deux*”—the reciprocal negotiated “dance” between our stories and participants’ stories (Janesick,

2000). Analogous to our usage of musical metaphor, Janesick (2000, 1998) uses dance as a powerful expressive device, layering and connecting multiple meanings and providing new ways to rethink complex research concepts. We contend that new metaphors are needed such as those provided by rap music to reconsider the multiple roles and locations we inhabit as researchers. *The Beat of Boyle Street* combines making rap music and computer audio production technology as recreation in a school setting. As we (Brett and Karen) sit down with young people to begin creating music, we are simultaneously leisure practitioners, teachers, audio producers, and leisure researchers. On a more basic level but of no less importance, the shared experience of music requires both a player and an audience, and the ensuing performance becomes a *co-production* between performers and *active* listeners (Oakley, 2003). Thus, we account for our “participating selves” as researchers with an “explicit vocality” in the texts we co-produce (Coffey, 1999, p. 125).

A similar dialectic of “call and response” (Dimitriadis, 2001c, p. 26) exists between the rap performer (i.e., the MC) and the audience (e.g., “Everybody throw your hands in the air and wave them like you just don’t care!”) through which the line between performer and audience blurs to include those both on and off stage. This kind of artist-audience connection is striking for the ways that *both* the official speaker in a position of power and authority (i.e., the MC) and a group with a *different* kind of power (i.e., the audience) “speak,” listen, and momentarily connect to one another. The call and response dialectic is metaphorically characteristic of our research in *The Beat of Boyle Street*. These processes may be understood as operating in several ways: as young people call to invite us into their worlds, as we ask questions of them and they respond, as they make rap music and we respond to these compositions, and additionally in the various ways that we do not connect, dismiss the call, and fail to answer/respond.

We use autoethnography to situate our listening as an active “response” that requires a reflexivity or “recall” through which researchers work toward a “sufficient introspection about their feelings or motives or the contradictions they experience” (Ellis, 1999, p. 672). Autoethnography combines autobiography or the stories we tell about ourselves and ethnography, which are the stories we tell about cultures. According to Ellis (1999), autoethnography always speaks beyond itself to show how the concrete details of a specific life can convey understandings of a more general way of life. Autoethnographers aim to convey *both* aspects through their stories. Ellis and Bochner (2000) explained:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

“Autoethnography [also] teaches us to be both courageous and afraid” (Transken, 2005, p. 4). As Coffey (1999) further noted, these kinds of ethnographic “tales” centralize rather than add the researcher’s self by exploring the ways that the self is situated in the research, the space of writing, and the relationships between the self and the field. The back and forth “gaze” resonates with the call and response we understand as ethically vital to developing an informed research praxis with young people and rap music. Blurring the personal and the cultural, we hear our own stories interwoven with those of the young people with whom we construct meaningful leisure practices and with whom we critique our understandings of leisure. These stories give song to the anger and resistance toward taken for granted practices of recreation.

Thus, we reflect on an example from our research in which a 20-year-old young man who raps under the name “MC Ed Mile”³ was recording urban sounds in the downtown subway stations for a song he was writing about racism, poverty, and mass transit. He approached a person he described as a “business woman” to ask her a question. Later he told us:

At times it’s like, it’s like, ‘cause they see a Native guy they think I’m gonna ask them for money. Like, I had this stereotype just a couple days ago. I was walking down the street, and went up to ask this lady a question. I was like, “um, I was wondering if you could help me out?” and she was like “no no, I got nothing!” and I’m like “hold on, man, you never even listened to the question yet! I just wanted to interview you about what you thought about Churchill Station!”

MC Ed Mile reminds us that we often believe we know the answer to the question long before we hear it, and that we are often wrong. As leisure professionals we often think we know what appropriate development, positive outcomes, and skills young people need to survive, and what world they need to live within. But the rappers, b-boys, and b-girls we met had various other dreams including challenging and resisting mainstream societies or creating alternative life patterns that blended traditional Aboriginal practices with urban technological youth culture. Rather than a formulaic arrangement of leisure services, we (i.e., Brett, Karen, and *The Beat of Boyle Street* hip-hop performers) needed to compose new arrangements. For example, having struggled to overcome many hardships and to break down stereotypes, young people in *The Beat of Boyle Street* want to rap their stories to help other youth recreate or change their own stories. How can we value the skills and talents of a freestyle rapper as a youth mentor as much as someone who can, for example, lead group activities? This type of relationship requires creating new jobs, bringing agencies together to create new services or to deliver in new venues, and challenging assumptions about who can become a youth worker, recreation leader, or mentor.

The Power of Rap

Questions about the power of rap music are ultimately questions of the power of representational practices. Carlson and Dimitriadis (2003) noted that for people to free themselves of a colonial mindset, they must engage in “telling their own stories, in regaining control over their own representation in popular culture” (p. 18). As scholar-practitioners working with young people, we are unequivocally bound up in this engagement, and through which we co-create musical texts such as rap songs that offer counter-narratives that affirm, reconstruct, and re-present urban Aboriginal youth identities. Rap music and popular culture must become a valued arena of youth leisure research and practice to support young people in leisure pursuits that provide means of self-narrativization and self-representation. To value rap music and popular culture places leisure theory and youth development alongside political policies and advocacy and creating opportunities for young people to advocate for the world they design and the values of their choice.

We turn to listening practices as ethical practices to critically interrogate what we are hearing and *not hearing* in our research practice. Levinas suggested that ethics are suffused within the encounter of the Other, and if leisure scholars and practitioners are to wrestle with

³The name “MC Ed Mile” is a creative appropriation and play on the Eminem film titled “8 Mile.” “Ed” refers to Edmonton, and provides an indirect rhyme to “8”. This example shows how young people borrow from broader, global popular culture and use it in new ways in local contexts.

the inherent violence of these encounters, we must embrace a responsibility to be vulnerable to the Other as radical alterity (Burggraeve, 2002). Since conventional concepts of dialogue imply a “sameness,” (i.e., attempts by the listener to find commonality or to require the other to fit into pre-existing categories), dialogue potentially becomes an instance of violence or harm. To listen to the alterity requires attention to the responsibility the listener has for the Other and to ask: What does listening require differently of me?

This type of listening moves traditional leisure theories and practices off center stage, because they all too often say little to or about the realities of leisure for the young people like those attending Boyle Street Education Centre. Emphasis on “quick turnarounds of negative behaviors” or professionals planning appropriate service activities lead into established status quo programming viewed by these young people as white, oppressive, and racist. Furthermore, the young people we met at BSEC were inviting us to be their audience or co-producers of their performances, community, dreams, and realities. Listening, therefore, was an important aspect of this research, as researchers must be:

responsible for the ways we as unique individuals inhabit one another’s worlds, as well as how we write up our empirical material (or ‘data’), opening a space to see ethnography writ large, as a political praxis that individuals engage in particular ways and with real effects (Dimitriadis, 2001b, p. 579).

Thus, in this paper we are interested not in the ways that we have intervened in the lives of young people, but rather how they have entered into our lives. What are we missing and *dismissing* when we listen to rap music made by young people? How has leisure theory missed or *dismissed* these performances? More importantly, how would these songs change leisure theory?

Personal Stories, Collective Stories

Stories are key concepts in our research. When researchers describe their studies, they additionally tell stories about themselves, since all writing is allegorical and at some level autobiographical (Clifford, 1986; Coffey, 1999). When we write research, we also are writing our selves. Through autoethnography (Ellis, 1999; Holt, 2003; Richardson, 1997) and arts-based ethnography sharing participants’ musical stories (Denzin, 2003), researchers open up critical space to investigate alternative qualitative research methods while re-framing leisure studies and recreation practices as political realms deeply rooted in cultural processes (Rojek, 1997). In some sense we are working to situate the politics inherent in “the meeting up of stories” each already with its own spaces, geographies, culture, and history while also “meeting up with others who are also journeying, also making histories” (Massey, 2000, p. 230). Echoing Maya Angelou, Ellis (1998) wrote that new qualitative conceptualizations for research “may not necessarily provide the answer to a question or a complete solution to a problem; rather it opens up promising directions for further inquiry or efforts” (p. 10). She added that the aim “is not to write the end of an existing story but to write a more hopeful beginning for new stories” (Ellis, 1998, p. 10). Therefore, we designed the research to engage with young people making and performing rap music and to share stories of making meanings, identities, cultures, and “more hopeful beginnings.” This conceptualization required new methodological and analytical frames, as Denzin (2003) noted: “If the world is a performance, not a text, then today we need a model of social science that is performative” (p. 11).

We deliberately chose a remix of arts-based narrative ethnographic methods (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003; Denzin, 1997; Giroux, 2001; Glover, 2003;

Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Richardson, 1997) as well as Indigenous research approaches (Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2001, 2003), because storytelling offers useful ways of knowing and provides for the creative construction of counternarratives capable of intervening in and disrupting dominant discourses. For example, Conrad (2004) used “popular theatre” activities to create narrative performance texts in her research with rural Aboriginal youth “at risk” as a qualitative method that was “both participatory and performative,” and offered “alternative ways to engage participants in doing research” (p. 3). Conrad claimed that arts-based participatory research allowed youth to construct a counter-narrative that “interrupts the ‘common sense’ or taken-for-granted understandings of ‘at-risk,’ providing a more complex picture . . . [of] youths’ choice to engage in risky behaviour, the enjoyment” they gain from it and its resistant quality—its potential to undermine unjust social structures. (p. 19).

We appreciated these tensions and complexities as they related to scenes of rap and hip-hop particularly where our research sought to complicate or extend understandings of popular music in young people’s everyday lives. Furthermore, this approach required attention through listening and led to changes in our story and hence, the autoethnographic tone of this piece. We are “mashing up” the narratives we encountered with our own understandings of leisure theories, research, and practice to form a new composition.

[**Karen**] I remember the first time I listened to the recordings of Boyle Street students. The instrumental backgrounds were too loud, the words too fast, the violence overwhelming. I sought written lyrics over listening. With time, I learned to listen over and over again, feeling for the rhythm and emotions carried through sound waves, and train my ear to the accent and flow of the rap. When watching them perform, in class or on stage, I now bring myself to a presence around the heritage and resistance of rap, the particular stories of the students at Boyle Street, and their challenges to my cognitive, verbal, and visual research approaches.

We contend that rapping operates as a type of performative storytelling. Denzin (2003) explains that research around “performance” considers the “ways that people create, and continue to create themselves through communicative action” (p. 8). The music itself creates ripples, relationships, and movement within the performers and an audience. “Music is a powerful, unrecognized force in the whole dynamics of human communication and motivation” (Eger, 2005, p. 328). This power becomes present in spaces where leisure researchers gain a sophisticated knowledge about rap music and understand its resonances with Aboriginal storytelling, chanting, dancing, music, and potlatch practices that challenge norms and government policies. Carlson and Dimitriadis (2003) described these spaces as intersections “where people can find some shared language and overlapping interests. It is, at best, a borderland space, constructed and maintained through dialogue among border crossers” (p. 31).

A performative act such as making a rap song “puts culture in motion . . . it performs, narrates, examines the complex ways in which people experience themselves” (Denzin, 2003, p. 8). As such, young people’s rap performances carry political and social consequences:

Performance is an act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, a way of revealing agency. Performance becomes public pedagogy when it uses the aesthetic, the performative, to foreground the intersection of politics, institutional sites, and embodied experience. In this way, performance is a form of agency, a way of bringing culture and the person into play. (Denzin, 2003, p. 9)

Collective stories, always played out at intersections of personal and cultural (i.e., public) arenas, are often capable of eliciting a response that connects people and builds empathy. More than just bringing the culture and person of the performer into play, musical stories bring *us*, as researchers, educators, advocates, scholars, and *listeners* into play as well as *co-producers*. Listening to young people and sharing the processes of creating music together create new spaces for dialogue and for being and becoming better able to respond to each other.

[Karen] I have a whole new vocabulary about hip-hop: “hella props” (much respect), for “phat beats” (good rhythms to dance to) and “spitting rhymes” (rapping) with “mad flows” (impressive use of words and complex rhythms in a rap vocal). Furthermore, it is a vocabulary that is not particularly useful with my working- and middle-class university students. Rap and hip-hop are a distant world to them. Out of a class of forty, only one—a young, black woman—listened to or could identify rap and hip-hop artists. Many of the others dismiss rap as “not music” and violent. They have no need to listen or wonder. I ponder how they will be able to implement recreation programs if they cannot hear the lives of the young people. I deliberate about how I will structure stories and lectures so these students can hear. I struggle to describe a leisure practice that includes respect and space for the resistance and soul of rap and hip-hop among many diverse practices. And where do I even begin to teach skills relevant to listening to music, attending to performances, playing with or being an educated audience as part of leisure scholarship, research and practice?

What We as Leisure Scholars and Practitioners (Dis)miss in Leisure Practice

Attention to listening practices offers an important alternative to the dominance of both the visual and the primacy of the voice/speaker in contemporary culture (Chambers, 1990; du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Even as researchers, we are not often the best of listeners when aspects of stories extend beyond our immediate understandings.

[Brett] My ideas about what “counts” as “appropriate” leisure have been dramatically altered because of the relationships I have shared with young people in *The Beat of Boyle Street*. Often we would spend the afternoon walking through downtown, talking about life, exploring the city, and admiring the graffiti. Using portable recorders, we’d capture bits of the urban soundscape to later mix into our musical compositions. It was only later, when I listened back to these recordings that I realized what I had missed the first time around. Thus, these walks also served as explorations of my preconceptions of race, class, and age. I grew up in a predominantly white suburb in the Midwestern United States. I had little idea of what it is like to grow up in an urban centre, in a culture that must struggle to overcome poverty and racism. One young Aboriginal woman, who goes by “LiGhTsWiTcH”, guided me through her downtown, and showed me the alleyways, hangouts, and “after hours” dance clubs where she would spend the night when she was homeless. I heard myself speaking on the playback of the recording in one alleyway behind a club, describing the alley as “nasty and creepy” even though it was clearly an important leisure space to LiGhTsWiTcH, full of memories, key friendships, and connected to hours of dancing. Until that point, I wonder if I had not wanted her to see things from *my perspective*, and move her away from the “negative” leisure pursuits that I imagined occurred in alleyways. Rather than merely label the alleyway as a dangerous or deviant space, LiGhTsWiTcH taught

me to see it within a broader personal and cultural context, a space she was moving through as she needed it at a particular moment in her life, a space of leisure and respite in a time of hardship and uncertainty. Before LiGhTsWiTcH showed me “things from a street kid’s perspective” I had little idea how important nighttime leisure spaces in downtown were to the young people who need somewhere to go, and need people with whom to share the night. Now I smile whenever I see her graffiti tag “Switch” in an alley: LiGhTsWiTcH has been there.

In the following passage, LiGhTsWiTcH further explained why all-night dance clubs are important to her, and we began to understand that if not for these “after hours” clubs, she would spend more nights on the streets. The paradox was that although clubbing kept her off the streets and away from an often violent home, she used a variety of drugs to help her to stay awake and to escape into dance. As we were walking through downtown, she explained:

I’m not into hip-hop as much as I am into, like, um, techno and house, and trance and stuff. I use that type of music to get away from my everyday occurrences, and you know, like every Friday night I go to the club, you know, to fucking have a good time and party and like, get away from the weekday stresses of stuff.

[Karen] Tonight, I proposed that the Youth Committee of the Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee support some of these after-hours clubs or look to alternative leisure spaces. It is clear that many people and businesses are moving against these clubs and closing down avenues for young people to recreate as they choose. In addition, a sole focus on drugs obscures the lack of facilities that meet the needs of the young people. These young people do not want to play sports or be involved in traditional community activities; they want opportunities to make their music and art, to dance, and be with others who accept them. They would prefer a safe place but not at the cost of giving up who they are, their music and art, and the community they have built through these practices.

In *Outlaw Culture*, hooks (1994) claimed that “talking critically about popular culture [is] a powerful way to share knowledge, in and outside the academy, across differences, in an oppositional way” (p. 4). She added that “cultural studies that looks at popular culture have the power to move intellectuals out of the academy and into the street” (1994, p. 4). This movement characterized our experiences with students in *The Beat of Boyle Street* as we saw and heard new and different perspectives. These perspectives were best characterized as a space of paradoxical tensions between often fuzzy and fluid polarities, a space where we could work the borders between rigid binary oppositions such as good/bad or right/wrong, “opening up a hybrid space for intellectual work” (Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003, p. 10) and critical leisure practice and research. Rather than planned outcomes or professional assessments, these “borderlands” framed alternative practices and “results.” Before defining and measuring outcomes, leisure researchers and practitioners may need to find a place to mash up, rap with, or learn to become an educated sophisticated rap and hip-hop audience. Then, a co-production of alternative leisure within larger societal and political contexts and aims can be composed.

[Karen] He stood, headphones securely on his head, singing the lyrics from *Body Rott* by the rap group “Bone Thugs N Harmony.” “Clarke” had recently returned to school after stealing a car for joyriding, crashing it while running from the

police, and suffering broken arms and multiple lacerations. He looked “like a mummy,” disfigured, and faced a life of continual pain. Losing himself in the music, his voice got louder, swearing with the lyrics. A school staff person heard the vulgar language, and before Brett knew it, Clarke was suspended. I had met Clarke earlier, struggling with the courage of alcohol, to perform at a school talent show. I wondered about his punishment and this constant focus on only positive language and behaviour. At 14, his life was now in shambles, and surely the anger at the police and his own disfigurement needed space. His world encompassed lots of violence and now mostly pain. The school officials wanted him to speak in sanitized language. Of course, I understood the rules around language and the struggles to teach appropriate and respectful interactions. But where were the spaces for these awful feelings and realities? How honest, respectful, and real were we to dismiss and look away? The words “Body Rott” and “fuck” were explosive, real, forceful words for Clarke’s reality. How would good social behaviour help him work through these issues? Where is anger appropriate? Where are these harsh, human feelings acceptable? What does leisure have to say to him and his situation?

So much of leisure theory and youth development focuses on “positive,” “appropriate,” and “non-violent” activities and practices (e.g., leadership skills, service, social skills) (Walker & White, 1998; Witt, 2002; Witt & Baker, 1997). If and when violence is addressed, it is subsumed under labels such as negative or deviant leisure. This judgment is clearly problematic for people who have experienced dominant society as colonialist, oppressive, and violent to their culture and being. For example, a rap called “Native Pride” by BSEC student “El Jefe” indicated his frustration with the ineffectiveness of violence but the futility of words unless he could rap them:

Violence don’t solve shit, silence ain’t shit either.
 What the fuck’s up with that? So I spit ether.
 People tell me to talk it out, what the fuck they talking about?
 I ain’t getting’ bullied, ‘cause I’m the first Native you’ve seen with a bulletproof
 hoodie.

Raspberry (2005) noted that young people do not buy the rhetoric and behavior of the middle class because “they don’t see evidence that changing their behavior will have much of a payoff beyond making the rest of us less uncomfortable with them” (p. A17). The rap and hip-hop we heard challenged us to adjust the rhythms and beats of the programs, services, structures and relationships around the young rappers and dancers so they could become who they wanted to become.

Engaging with Rap, Rethinking Leisure

Rap songs often present an intense re-performance of students’ experiences and are open to many interpretations. A rap song is “always already an interpretation *and* is in need of an interpretation” (Scott, 1992, p. 37). Many students have rapped about the harsh realities of “life on the streets” and their struggles with drugs, violence, prostitution, police, and suicide. Such lyrics are often beyond the limits of our understandings and experiences. In one rap, a student, “MC Novakane” (age 19), rhymed:

I went from hard labor to nothing to making raps as something
 Take a walk on the block too many bitches be frontin’

The noble Native receiving respect, replacing the hate
 If I die in this world, Creator open the gate
 Too much money and drugs, thugs killing for nothing
 Elders cry up above, believe they're praying for something
 Now twist, entwine, put my spirit in this rhyme
 Mother Earth in chains let me explain as I define . . .

These lyrics required us to rethink our understandings of the importance of rap as leisure, the uses of language and style, and the unique hybrid of Aboriginal cultures and hip-hop music. MC Novakane expressed that after being in jail ("hard labor"), and being released and having nothing to do, rap music became his creative focus. MC Novakane (note "Novocain" a substance that blocks pain) attributed his present survival to making rap songs. He insisted: "let me explain as I define" a different set of ideas, words, and experiences. For instance, in his line "too many bitches be frontin" MC Novakane is rapping *against* the prostitution that he sees affecting Aboriginal women in the city. Yet, does his use of the word "bitches" paradoxically reproduce forms of sexual oppression and violence that he opposes? Perhaps. Could "bitches" here also be a term that indicates toughness and ability to survive on the streets despite great adversity?

Something similar might be said of the term "thugs." The late rapper Tupac Shakur complicated this term claiming "thug life" was more than a phrase about violence. It also indicated a struggle for social justice in the face of extreme poverty and racism. In a *Washington Post* interview, Shakur described thug life as a new kind of civil rights movement: "Thug life is a new kind of black power," he said. "The code of thug life [is] a code to fix violence on the street. Shooting and drive-bys on the street, we're against it. I just try to speak about things from the street. My ear is to the street. It's like my battle cry to America" (January 13, 2005).⁴ Given this usage of the term, many Aboriginal youth who are living in poverty and experiencing racism readily identify with Tupac Shakur and consider themselves "thugs." Dimitriadis (2001b) noted that rap music offers young people different and valuable skills (i.e., the skills of a thug):

I came to see the kind of urgency young people (especially young men) invested in rap music and its often problematic images and messages in very different ways. I came to see their use of rap music, their constructions of invulnerable icons, their constructions of community, as one node in a much larger elaboration of resources for survival upon which young people drew. (p. 593)

What began to emerge is that rap lyrics and musical styles require understandings of complex contexts and sometimes conflicting meanings that young people employ in their rhymes and vocal lines. As researchers and practitioners, we can never be sure that what we hear resonates with our own preconceived understandings, uses, and meanings. These young people had developed an effective community among themselves. They were able to survive by connecting to each other, providing support, and expressing their own views through their music. The challenge for leisure researchers and practitioners is to describe and understand these communities and assist them in creating a world hospitable to their songs and dances.

[Karen] The young people express their own dreams and hopes for a better life. I, too, want places of safety, regular access to good food and housing, opportunities

⁴Paul VanDevelder in his January 13, 2005 commentary for *the Los Angeles Times* (www.latimes.com) provides a similar story connected to the experiences of Native Americans.

for productive activity, and access to recreation for them. But what does that really mean? What would appropriate, safe housing and a functional family look like from the perspective of these young people? Would it be a “family” of friends? Given their level of education and their resistance to dominant and discriminatory society, what jobs would they really want? How would they [we?] work out the oppression and discrimination, the need to bend to authority? What would a life, home, job look like that truly respected their stories and lives? What would leisure practice look like if we engaged in the political activities of these youth? What would we have to know to perform with them their resistance and views of the world?

Hip-hop is a way that many young people “learn how to position” themselves, as well as contest how they have been positioned within historic and ongoing struggles over power (Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003, p. 12). We recognized that anger and violence are aspects of leisure that are often negatively labeled, deemed inappropriate, or silenced. In social struggles against racism, poverty, and addictions, when is anger an appropriate response to cultural violence? Where else than a rap song would it be as fantastic to hear an explosion of anger, expletives, and an outpouring of emotion and self-expression? While people too easily dismiss rap music as full of anger and violence, we need to recognize that many young people turn to making raps as an alternative to participating violence.

[Brett] After working on music together for several months, MC Rasta P showed me his diary/journal/lyric book. In it, he’d written a list of “ten things I can do to stay out of trouble today” as he struggled with the conditions of his probation and addictions. The number one item was “write lyrics” followed by “play pool” and “visit my grandfather.” Here I began to see the importance of leisure in this young person’s life as a space of expression, solace, and respite, as he wrote in his lyrics “when the darkness lays.” While I believe in the power of music to speak to social issues, these were not outcomes designed into the research, nor was the research developed as an “intervention” to keep Rasta P out of jail or off drugs. Rather, this was what happened and emerged when we shared making music and began listening to and supporting one another’s voices and stories.

Rewriting Leisure Research

In *The Beat of Boyle Street*, a primary challenge was to write about how the multiple ways we were involved in the project required us to reconsider how creating music works in terms of “creating leisure research.” Along these lines, Ellis (1999) wrote of creating *heartfelt* autoethnography (emphasis in the original). Ellis (1999) describes this concept as:

an ethnography that includes researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, spirits; produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality; celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail; examines how human experience is endowed with meaning; is concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences; encourages compassion and empathy, helps us know how to live and cope; features multiple voices and repositions readers and “subjects” as coparticipants in dialogue; seeks a fusion between social science and literature in which, as Gregory Bateson says, ‘you are partly blown by the winds of reality and partly an artist creating a composite out of the inner and outer events’; and connects the practices of social science with the living of life . . . to extend ethnography to include the heart. (p. 669)

We would add to include the ears. As Mahiri and Conner (2003) pointed out, the voices and views most egregiously absent in discourse about youth and social issues are those of young people themselves. Yet, we also must address the power and authority of our voices and views as researchers. We were “working the hyphens” (Dimitriadis, 2001b; Fine, 1998) in co-constructing “self-other relationships” in the context of the project as not only researchers and recreation providers, but also through a whole range of roles, as musical collaborators, promoters, and writers. Working the hyphens is a crucial process and relationship in qualitative research that questions:

how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are multiple in those relations . . . [working the hyphens] means creating occasions to discuss what is and what is not ‘happening between’, within the negotiated relations of *whose* story is being told, *why*, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, *why*, for whom, and with what consequence. (Fine, 1998, p. 135)

Rap music is a way of starting discussions about important social issues and a way of telling meaningful stories about hopes, dreams, and struggles through what Maya Angelou described as a means “to explain the pains and glory of our existence . . . we are characterized by the need to create stories, songs, and poems, and we continue to create” (Angelou, n.d.).

In addition to the need to continue to create and share stories, we agree with Richardson’s (1997) call to understand that all social science writing exists in the contexts of metaphors that shape narratives. We addressed leisure theory and research through musical metaphors specifically of rap and hip-hop. We interpreted musical ideas in light of larger traditions, became knowledgeable about the techniques of rap and hip-hop, and developed an awareness of basic conventions of audience behavior, which have their roots like the music itself in the experiences and realities of people who live in oppressed, marginalized, and violent spaces. We searched to respond with bursts of applause, shouts of praise, and whistle calls. Our listening-as-response added to the performance by lifting the music to a higher level and opening up possibilities for future performances. In this way, both performer and audience move to another stage where we *become* the music. “It’s really quite magical when that happens—when we’re *all* listening to the music” (Milano, 1984, p. 25).

The Beat of Boyle Street engaged us in processes of creating rap songs and stories “to explain the pains and glories” of our shared and yet different existence. As Coffey (1999) reminded us, literary forms of research “stand on the boundary between ethnography and autobiography” and as such are “more firmly rooted in a social context and the situatedness of the author-self” (p. 155). As a result, she noted, “This may have positive consequences for the representation of peopled, polyvocal social worlds” (Coffey, 1999, p. 155). Rap and hip-hop are aural “windows” into the everyday lives, dreams, and struggles of the young people at Boyle Street Education Centre. We are not sure the study of recreation has rested in areas where the world is tough, violent, vicious, and dangerous. Our herstory and history is permeated with examples that did not forward the well-being of Aboriginal youth (Transken, 2005). As practitioners, we often come to provide a “positive experience” for “youth-at-risk,” and we see that approach as valuable. The dark side remains dark when it is not explored, addressed, and heard. So many philosophers, musicians, authors, and psychologists reinforce a need to hear, look, and touch the dark side. Yet, we hope for more than mere recognition or an expression of voice with no listening for these young people. We are acutely aware of Levinas’s (Burggraeve, 2002) assessment that in dialogue we will make the Other like us and do violence to the radical alterity of that person. We are struggling to rap with these youth and co-produce alternatives encompassing multiple

perspectives, disciplines, methodologies, epistemologies, and empathies. We are seeking “moments of affinity and social change” (Transken, 2005, p. 15). We hope for a safer, more positive existence for these young people but wonder where are the spaces to explore this more positive world on *their* terms, not the practices of dominant society?

[Brett & Karen] Plans for a new downtown recreation centre have been proposed. Although there has been a long consultation process, the voices of urban Aboriginal youth have, once again, been sidelined. Although there is a space for “hanging out,” it is described as space for choral music and meditation. There are really no plans for areas to breakdance, set up a sound system for rap battles, or provide a graffiti wall. Behind the controlled entrance are all the traditional areas of exercise equipment, running tracks, and ball courts. Not only are most urban Aboriginal youth uninterested in these facilities, these areas do not even begin to support and play with their hip-hop world and struggles. In our efforts to better listen to and understand the voices and experiences of young people, we realize that there is much (leisure) work yet to be done.

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