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First Nations youth redefine resilience: listening to artistic productions of ‘Thug Life’ and hip-hop

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In recent decades, resilience research has striven to atone for the *Eurocentric* nature of research conducted with Canada’s Aboriginal populations. It has been cautioned, however, that if resilience research fails to account for Aboriginal population’s diversity, it risks culturalized images and pan-Aboriginalism. Definitions of resilience should be framed within community-specific models, recognizing dynamic subjects interacting in multiple social worlds. In partnership with six Saskatchewan First Nations communities, our work seeks to understand what resilience means to youth who live on-reserve. We draw on findings from two community-based projects developed with the Battleford Agency Tribal Chiefs First Nations. These projects used arts-based and mixed-methods to identify community strengths and barriers surrounding youth resilience. Although study findings show the influence of family, programming, and culture, our model is emended to show the importance of youth’s own definitions of resilience, even when these may appear antithetical to conventional norms. Drawing on the youth’s artistic pieces, evolving themes focus on hip-hop culture and Thug Life; showing youth creating a place to belong when they are experiencing a lack of belonging. Within the framework of listening to youth-driven resilience, we put forward an alternative model of reaching youth using positive elements of Thug Life and hip-hop.

Keywords: youth resilience; Thug Life; youth crime; arts-based methods; community-based research

Introduction

In recent decades, the field of resilience research has striven to atone for the Eurocentricity of early Western research conducted with Canada’s Aboriginal populations. Differentially defined as an individual or group’s ability to face everyday life challenges (Wesley-Esquimaux 2009), capacity to ‘recover from and survive adversarial conditions’ (McGuire 2010, 120), or the conditions under which individuals or groups experience ‘positive adaptation despite adversity’ (Fleming and Ledogar 2008, 1), the concept of resilience promotes an examination of the life stories and narratives of individuals and their surroundings. Such efforts aim to provide Aboriginal populations the opportunity to reclaim their traditional cultural identities as a means of *combating* the historical trauma stemming from Canada’s colonial legacy (Archibald and Dewar 2010). It has been cautioned, however, that resilience research risks committing the same

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oversights as traditional Western research by approaching Aboriginal communities as culturally homogenous, static, and resistant to change. Should resilience research fail to note that Canada's Aboriginal populations constitute a variety of culturally distinct groups, it risks a culturalized image of Aboriginal peoples 'as inert objects, not as active dynamic subjects interacting with the social world' (McGuire 2010, 124). This consideration cautions against 'pan-Aboriginalism', the assumption that all indigenous communities are homogenous and that the research being done represents all indigenous peoples (Russell 2000, xii). As Ungar (2008, 219) notes, 'we do not yet know what resilience means in non-*western* populations and marginalized groups such as Aboriginal people who live side-by-side with their "mainstream" neighbours in *western* settings'. Thus, resilience research should be framed within a culturally and community-specific model, and informed by the youth themselves, as factors affecting individual resilience are intimately linked to their relations with family and community, as well as other important connections. A key component of First Nations youth resilience is to have the youth locate themselves in their own terms, appreciating their definition of resiliency and identity.

The concept of community resilience is gaining currency as an appropriate concept with which to recognize the importance of locally informed definitions and support the position, so fundamental to Aboriginal cultures, that the community and the individual are inseparable (Fleming and Ledogar 2008; Ledogar and Fleming 2008; Kirkmayer et al. 2009). Community resilience envisions community members as experts in their own lives and places focus on acknowledging community strengths and rebuilding strategies (Anderson 2008; Leafloor 2012), rather than on individual or social problems (Ledogar and Fleming 2008). Resilience is not just an individual's capacity to cope with adversity, but a community's capacity to extend resources to sustain *well-being* and provide these resources in culturally relevant ways (Ledogar and Fleming 2008; Peters 2005; Secombe 2002; Ungar 2008). Notably, the concept of resilience is also employed to investigate how marginalized youth populations develop practices to ensure that their own survival within difficult situations. Resiliency research conducted with adolescents consistently suggests the importance of considering the interrelationship between the socio-ecological context in which youth find themselves and the processes of identity development which youth engage with in direct response (William et al. 2010; Chen et al. 2012). Re-conceptualizing youth behavior that may conventionally be termed 'delinquent' as resilient suggests that young people endorse practices associated with delinquency as 'healthy adaptations' through which to endure difficult personal circumstances (Bottrell 2007; Theron and Malindi 2010).

The position developed in this paper suggests that community-prescribed pathways toward resilience must build inter-generational bridges between youth and community members. This necessitates an understanding of youth's strengths – even when these may appear antithetical to conventional norms – and building upon them to embrace the ways youth practice resilience. However, the means to initiate and substantiate this inter-generational dialog between community leaders and youth may not always be immediately apparent. We draw upon findings from community-based research projects developed in partnership with the Battleford Agency Tribal Chiefs (BATC) First Nations. These projects used visual and mixed methods to examine the local contexts of First Nations youth and to identify community strengths and barriers surrounding youth resilience. In initial consultations with key community stakeholders, in-depth interviews identified the importance of community-guided frameworks for promoting resilience.

They also identified concerns over the presence of at-risk, ‘unreachable’ youth who expressed little interest in connecting with their traditional cultural identities and community programs. The second phase of the research invited youth to engage in the production of artistic pieces as a means of expressing their own perspectives on their lives and resiliency. Key ideas emerging from the art of at-risk youth focused on aspects of hip-hop culture and rap music as sources of resilience and strength. Although we discuss youth doing well, who demonstrate resilience in more conventional ways, the focus of this paper is on youth not in school and deemed at risk. Toward understanding youth-informed definitions of resilience, we specifically focus on the example of those youth not in school who harbor a distinct interest in elements of African-American hip-hop culture and, specifically, the artistry of the late hip-hop icon Tupac Shakur. We suggest that these youth, though locally characterized as unreachable due to a lack of interest in the culture of their wider communities, may find their experiences and lived realities better reflected and articulated in adolescent hip-hop culture. Given more familiarity with the socio-historical context in which hip-hop is produced, and the manner in which concepts such as Shakur's ‘Thug Life’ subtly promote notions of individual resilience and community revitalization, community stakeholders might incorporate this interest in hip-hop culture into programs meant to best engage youth. A better appreciation of the pro-social dimensions of hip-hop’s recurring themes and commentaries on the African-American cultural experience may point toward a common ground wherein community members, Elders, and youth might collectively appreciate the importance of community revitalization, healthy communal kinship networks, and the adoption of personal identities based around self-empowerment and resilience.

Context: Canada’s colonial legacy

Canada is home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities with distinct historical origins, cultural traditions, lifestyles, geography, and languages (Warry 2008; Crooks, Chiodo, and, Thomas 2011). However, these communities also share a history of colonization, loss of traditional life, and oppression. Many Aboriginal populations experienced assimilation policies, forced relocation, and confinement to reserves. Further, the residential school system ensured that many Aboriginal youth would be separated from their families and, oftentimes, forbidden to practice their native spiritualities or speak their languages (Kirmayer 1994). The resultant cultural decimation and inter-generational trauma has been devastating to Aboriginal peoples in Canada, contributing directly to the extensively documented income and health disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Fleming and Ledogar 2008; Statistics Canada 2010; Crooks, Chiodo, and, Thomas 2011).

It follows that Aboriginal youth face a high number of what Fleming and Ledogar (2008) call risk factors, necessitating a need for resilience. Compared to non-Aboriginal youth, they disproportionately experience child welfare involvement, poverty, poor housing and homelessness, and inadequate living conditions (CCCYA 2010; National Council on Welfare 2007). Life on reserve also poses a number of unique challenges. Conditions in many rural Aboriginal communities have been referred to as ‘Third World’, due to abysmal housing and infrastructure, lack of access to healthcare, sanitation crises, low-quality educational offerings, and poor employment prospects (National Aboriginal Housing Association 2009; Charleson 1998). Burgeoning literature cites high unemployment and poverty rates for First Nations people and youth living on reserve. In 2006, only

51.9% of First Nations people aged 25–54 years and living on reserve were employed, compared to 66.3% living off reserve (Gionet 2009). A 2010 report on *The Income Gap between Aboriginal Peoples and the Rest of Canada* found that non-Aboriginal Canadians working on rural reserves make up only 9% of the working population yet earn 88% more money than their First Nations colleagues (Wilson and Macdonald 2010). Poverty amongst Aboriginal youth in Canada is unrivaled compared to any other demographic (Macdonald and Wilson 2013). Data collected in the 2006 census show that half of all First Nations children in Canada live below the poverty line, compared to 18% of non-Aboriginal children (CCCYA 2010).

Social context is related in complex ways to difficult issues facing Aboriginal youth, such as suicide rates (Canadian Center for Justice Statistics 2006; Minaker and Hogeveen 2009); over-representation within the criminal justice system (CCCYA 2010; Totten 2009; Munch 2010); and alcohol, drug, and inhalant addictions (Dell, Dell, and Hopkins 2005). The suicide rate for Aboriginal peoples is roughly twice that of the general population in Canada, and Aboriginal youth are five to seven times more likely to die of suicide than non-Aboriginal youth (CCCYA 2010). Crime, custody, addictions, and victimization rates amongst young people on reserve are substantially higher than in either rural or urban areas (Canadian Center for Justice Statistics 2006). Aboriginal youth are also more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than Aboriginal adults (Canadian Center for Justice Statistics 2006). In a 2006 Ekos survey of First Nations persons living on reserve, nearly half (46%) felt they were in high danger of becoming victims of property crime in their community, and more than a third (37%) felt they were in danger of physical or sexual assault (Ekos Research Associates 2006). Simply put, youth of First Nations ancestry in Canada are more likely to be incarcerated than they are to graduate from high school (CCCYA 2010). In 2010, Aboriginals accounted for 26% of youth admissions to the correctional system, yet represent only 6% of the general youth population in Canada (Munch 2010).

Community-based participatory research methodology

The BATC First Nations, a Saskatchewan-based organization of six communities, approached researchers in the Department of Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan to form a community-based research collaboration to address community concerns about justice. The BATC wanted to learn more about youth for two explicit reasons. First, they were reviewing community programming with respect to justice and child welfare and wanted to identify the experiences and knowledge of community members and youth. Second, the communities had identified youth addictions, crime, and custody as key areas of concern. As such, BATC saw a research focus on youth resilience as essential. A research team was established as a partnership involving university academics, community members, band members, Chiefs, community councilors, and advisors from BATC First Nation reserves.

The initial project, titled *First Nations Community Perspectives on Youth Resiliency and Social Justice* (2010–2011), had a qualitative design and used focus groups and in-depth interviews with stakeholders toward understanding community perspectives on youth resilience. Stakeholders represented individuals who worked directly or indirectly with youth, including representatives from governance (chief and council), community Elders, and band members working in justice, addictions, education, youth programming,

counseling, and social services. Stakeholders were both male and female, with ages ranging over six decades, from young adults to Elders.

Informed by the advisory groups and community-led culturally relevant methodology, a second project, *Resilience to Offending: Listening to Youth On-Reserve* (2011–2013), began with the establishment of community-based Advisory Groups from each of the reserve communities. The primary role of these Advisory Groups was to ensure that all aspects of the research were undertaken in respectful and culturally appropriate ways. Together, we established a mixed-methods approach to data collection, including qualitative and quantitative surveys and arts-based methods. Quantitative data were gathered from 32 youth participants using the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28), a screening tool designed to explore individual, relational, cultural, and communal resources that may bolster resilience.¹ Quantitative data were also collected from 332 youth and adult community members on five reserves in collaboration with BATC justice, with explicit attention to matters of crime, justice, and safety. The art-based method and qualitative interview guides were designed to support the CYRM-28, and help understand the more complex nature of young people's lives growing up on-reserve. The qualitative design is well suited to capturing the more hidden aspects of resilience. Forty-nine youth from various BATC communities participated in art workshops and interviews. In addition, 20 key stakeholders participated in in-depth interviews, focusing on how they viewed issues confronting First Nations youth and youth resilience. Because issues facing youth may be extremely sensitive, we aimed to build additional trust by facilitating a number of open discussions through community focus groups.

Youth and community members were recruited for the in-depth interviews, focus groups, and art workshops based on criteria developed by the community research team and Advisory Groups. Communities were interested in talking with youth who they defined as resilient as well as youth defined as at-risk, with being in school or not in school (at least not regularly or expelled) as a key factor for these respective designations. Although the Advisory Groups specifically wanted to learn from youth deemed more at risk and not currently in school, only nine of the 49 participants fit this definition. The community-based researchers suggested that the lower numbers of youth defined as at-risk reflected the disinterest of these youths in becoming involved and was not an adequate representation. These nine youth are a primary focus of the discussion within this paper, are between 12 and 16 years of age, male, and not in school. All of the youth have been given pseudonyms.

Both studies used a respectful and participatory research (PR) approach based on anti-oppressive ways of understanding (Moosa-Mitha 2005). With a focus on community interests and needs as opposed to individual or clinical transformation (Macaulay et al. 1997), our PR helped to shed light on the broader and more holistic context of youth resilience to crime. Understanding the context of resilience for First Nations youth required working with community members to reflect upon their own experiences and develop strategies for transformation that would be more effective in the local context. We did not rely on strict research agendas but rather collaborated with community members, dispelling the 'classical expert/community dichotomy' (Macaulay et al. 1997, 7).

Our university team reflected often on the privilege of developing this collaborative partnership and the deepening relationships with youth, stakeholders, and community members. We were reflexive in on our role as non-Aboriginals seeking Aboriginal perspectives and concerned that we may *just not get it* (Stelmach 2009, 2). It was clear

that our experiences reflected our own social location and we were moved to challenge our own assumptions about time and research agendas especially, as other researchers have noted, the time it took to reflect on whether our research was honorable (Stelmach 2009). Insights gained came with critical self-reflection as well as the gift of understanding ourselves, our own vulnerabilities as researchers, and the privilege of building relationships where we learn from each other.

The analysis was guided by team discussions as well as theoretical frameworks employed by anti-oppressive theory (Moosa-Mitha 2005), and included an understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples' well-being, history, culture, and society. The data analysis also followed phenomenological guidelines (Munhall 1994; van Manen 1984), whereby transcripts were first examined by four of the university researchers, both line by line and holistically, and then shared with four of the community researchers and stakeholders who provided a further contextualization of the transcripts toward uncovering meanings. These findings were presented in the form of a working community report, website, video, and posters to the Chief and Council and interested stakeholders in three of the different BATC communities to ensure that meanings and use of the findings were agreed upon collaboratively.

Listening to communities: crime, safety, and pathways to resilience

Findings show that community members feel unsafe and concerned about crime, youth crime, gang involvement, substance abuse, bullying, and youth at risk. According to the 2009 General Social Survey on Victimization (GSS), 93% of Canadians said they were satisfied with their personal safety from crime (Brennan 2011). In comparison, 45.3% of BATC reserve residents indicated they felt unsafe from youth crime, and only 34.5 percent said they felt 'safe'. These findings are also reflected in data from in-depth interviews with youth and community members. One youth not currently in school, Curtis, discussed not feeling safe in his home and having no one to discuss it with:

A: I just don't feel safe living here.

Q: Where don't you feel safe?

A: In my house

Q: Is there anyone that you can talk to about that?

A: No

Misuse of alcohol, tobacco, prescription drugs, and other substances is a primary concern for Aboriginal people in First Nations communities (Kroes 2008) and, not surprisingly, is correlated to involvement with police (Public Safety Canada 2012). This was also reflected by residents of all BATC reserves, who overwhelmingly (>90%) responded that alcohol was a factor contributing to youth crime in their community. When asked what youth activities they felt represented a problem on their reserves, community members implied deep concerns about crime, alcohol, drug use, and custody. The majority (65%) of respondents also indicated that violence amongst youth was a problem on their reserves. Lack of programs, activities, boredom, and feeling that youth on reserve lacked a sense of community and historical identity were perceived by community members as major contributors to youth crime.

A potential pathway to community and youth resilience to crime is increasing shared activities and using existing resources and community facilities. Many adult community

members were aware of the positive influence of youth programming, as well as where more programming (as well as more community and parental involvement) was needed. For example, John, a stakeholder and police officer, emphasized the need for additional programming and community participation:

A lot of the stuff that we're lacking on our reserve is sports programming. I remember, you had a real winning team, like your sports program was good, but we didn't have the support from parents, funding and then the coaching. The support coaching, we didn't have that because nobody volunteered for it.

The majority of stakeholders suggested that youth would benefit from an increased connection to community and cultural identity, and indicated this was missing despite being an essential element in youth development. Community members and youth in school expressed a connection between spirituality, cultural practice, and youth resilience. Many of the youth in school and deemed resilient by their communities created artistic expressions related to the support and strength they derived from their spirituality and culture (Figure 1).

The piece above, drawn by Andrew, is a picture that he explained is about how it may look in heaven where he imagines his father to be:

its like I draw crosses cuz of my dad, like I was always thinking about him even though we didn't know each other that good. Like, I always wish I got to know him better. And then the scenery is, I can just imagine how it looks, like in heaven, it always just comes to mind, wonder how it looks and I wonder how it feels and its just a nice relaxing place I like to draw.

Another piece, drawn by Emily, reflected her own identity and strength being tied to dance and cultural activities (Figure 2):

These two drawings both relate to the theme of spirituality and traditional/cultural practices, the loss of which was considered by stakeholders to be a barrier to resilience. As Margaret, a community Elder, explained:



Figure 1. Spirituality and culture.



Figure 2. Dance and cultural activities.

A lot of these youth they just don't know what to believe anymore. To me, the way I understand is that they talk about 'you're lost.' A person is 'lost' and I think this is where they are most of these youths in our communities.

Dave, another Elder, expressed his concern that youth do not have pride in their collective and historical identity of their reserves held by many Elders and have lost their ties to traditional spirituality and cultural practice:

Yeah, to me it really doesn't matter what spirituality a person believes in as long as he believes in something like that. And a lot of times, when people talk about their culture, it's not just the spiritual beliefs of the culture that are involved. It's even the other activities within that culture, like chopping wood

Many of the stakeholders, themselves older community members, saw a disconnect between youth and Elders as one of the aggravating factors for this loss of spirituality, culture, and history. Importantly, this is not only a problem for youth, but for youth and older generations. A female Elder, Shelley, discussed this gap as a generational issue:

because the youth are always like, 'oh those Elders'. They're blaming Elders and the Elders are [saying] 'Oh, those young people you know they're no good, up to no good and blah blah blah'. So that kind of conflict is going on. Who's going to get well? So that's what happening.

Much of the research on resilience in First Nations communities recognizes Indigenous culture as a form of resilience (Fleming and Ledogar 2008). Cultural continuity and enculturation to traditional worldviews is commonly linked to positive outcomes and resilience, including less involvement with the criminal justice system (Andrews, Bonta, and Wormith 2004). Increased socialization and programs related to traditional culture and spirituality decrease recidivism rates (Naclia 2009). Our findings with stakeholders and youth support this literature and the importance of family, First Nations history, and culture as pathways to resilience.

While all of the youth who were in school during the study produced art work representing their families, culture, and/or individual identities on full pages and using

many colors (as in the examples above), the youth not in school drew much smaller images and mostly in black and white, left many unfinished and tended to replicate each other's images of thug life, gangsters, Tupac Shakur, prisoners, and rap. While the art was displayed at a gallery in a show celebrating the youth, entitled *When the Spirit Speaks* we asked adult community stakeholders to speak to the meaning they saw in the art. Comparing the art of kids in school and not in school, one of the community research partners explained:

So with these works here, most of them, when you look at them and compare them to these ones over here, the kids that are again not in school, they're so much more restricted. They're smaller. And then you look at these, they're so free. They don't just take a corner of the canvas and draw something there, and then take another corner of the canvas and draw something there. They cover the whole canvas with the painting. It's so much more colourful, so their world, there is so much more colour and opportunity. They still depict whatever struggles they're going through in their artwork, in the hopes that they have.

The youth not in school, shared lives characterized by a lack of connection to the larger community, school, and some spoke of homes where safety was a concern. Although these youth had a sense of family and belonging, many of their parents had been through trauma and some through residential school. Their small black and white images were said by the same community partner to reflect feeling of being silenced as well as wanting acceptance and guidance:

There's a sense of family and belonging, as dysfunctional as it, it's family and they know where they belong in the dynamics of the home, so they have a sense of belonging. What they're looking for is guidance on how to ... the parents themselves, a lot of them have been through a lot of trauma in these communities.

Having a lack of ability to express inner realities was explained by many of the community partners to be common amongst children and youth who have experienced either personal trauma or indirect trauma, such as their parents' experience of residential schools. Although this paper now turns its focus on the nine youth identified as not being in school, all of the stakeholders and community members in the larger study expressed concerns for youth who have lost their connection to school and many connected this to a disconnection with culture, community, and historical traumas linked to colonization.

Alternative resilience: hip-hop, thug life, and the artistic legacy of Tupac Shakur

While findings with 'resilient' BATC youth and community stakeholders support the importance of family, increased programs, and cultural continuity as pathways to resilience, findings with the youth not in school suggest two additional and related themes. First, the definition of resilience must expand to include what it means for Aboriginal youth who are living beside mainstream communities and thus inundated with mainstream media and popular culture. In the BATC study, the art created by youth not in school had less association with Indigenous culture, family, and their communities and more relation to hip-hop music and, specifically, to Tupac Shakur. Raised by a single mother who formerly served as the highest ranking female official of the Black Panther Party, Shakur parlayed an interest in drama and the arts into a burgeoning hip-hop career, releasing his debut solo album *2pacalypse Now* in 1991. Lauded for its astute socio-

political commentary and lyrics relating to the systemic forces responsible for the continued marginalization of African-American populations, the *2pacalypse Now* album is particularly significant due to the manner in which Shakur's attempts to appropriate and repurpose the term 'Nigga' by reintroducing it into hip-hop vernacular as an acronym for 'Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accomplished'.

By all accounts, Shakur is also responsible for creating and popularizing the concept of Thug Life; a term serving as both an acronym speaking to the root causes of urban disorganization – 'The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody' (Tucker 2001, 73) – and a philosophy meant to promote 'a struggle for social justice in the face of extreme poverty of racism' (Lashua and Fox 2006, 268). As Shakur himself explains:

By 'thug', I mean, not criminal, someone that beats you. I mean, the underdog. The person that had nothing and succeeds is a thug because he overcame all obstacles. It has nothing to do with the dictionary's version. To me, thug is my pride, not being someone that goes against the law, not being someone that takes, but being someone that has nothing, and even though I have nothing and no home to go to, my head is up high. My chest is out. I walk tall. I talk loud. I'm being strong. (Shakur 2003)

The attraction of youth to Shakur's artistry does not discredit the idea that forms of traditional culture and spirituality may be an important avenue toward resilience but modestly suggests an amended, more complicated telling of resilience of First Nations youth who are living in multifarious worlds. Second, some youth are being defined as more at-risk because they are not in school and are practicing behavior antithetical to conventional acceptable norms (being involved in gangs, violence, bullying); however, they are also displaying the formation of what we deem resilient identities and showing their communities possible ways to re-engage them.

Manifestations of Thug Life and rap music by youth from Saskatchewan reserves support attestations that rap music moves beyond blackness boundaries (Stavrias 2005). Dillan, a youth participant put forward the following lyrics, which he titled *Just a rap*:

All the kids in the world being thugs
 All of them dying and doing drugs
 Stealing from their mom and dad
 Its kinda sad it gets me madd
 Bullying is so bad. I try to live
 my life right. The shit that I did
 I think about it every night
 I thought I was cool
 being a fool getting kicked out of school
 I thought I can get high
 and fly I jumped out the window
 And died now good bye!

Here, this Saskatchewan First Nations youth is using rap to tell of his perception of his own life and experiences, relating this to 'all the kids in the world being thugs'. He is speaking to bullying, drug use, stealing, suicide, and being kicked out of school as well as self-reflection, hopelessness, and experiential insight. We argue that this serves as a powerful sign of a young First Nations youth using rap music as a means to represent himself and others who have survived unfair conditions and representation. Although rap and hip-hop are largely correlated with Western African-American youth culture, authors

such as Morgan and Bennett (2011, 191) are also careful to note that nations the world over ‘are using hip-hop to see, hear, understand, serve, and, ultimately, be transformed for the better by their brilliant and powerful young people’. As Rose (1994, 3) positively notes, ‘rappers continue to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and experiences of racial marginality in America’. Indeed, *Just a rap* represents a youth’s fantastic telling of self-transformation, suggesting he now understands that he was not so cool for being kicked out of school or getting high.

All nine participants chosen in consultation with the community research team and advisory group as at-risk presented images related to Thug Life. They often specifically included a Thug Life title, similar to the example below drawn by Bradley (Figure 3):

Most of the art related to Thug Life also displayed a rose image with similar detail and comparative artistic appearance to themes from Shakur’s poem, *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* (Shakur 2009), in which a rose growing amidst (and in spite of) the urban blight that surrounds it celebrates self-empowerment in spite of a lack of nurturing. Although the artists in our study did not talk about why they drew the rose, the symbolism of Tupac’s words resonated in conversations with the community-based research team and advisory group. These youth have not found safety in their homes or communities, but they have found their own voice and courage.

The familiarity demonstrated by a few of the youth with respect to Shakur himself reflects their strong associations with his messages. For example, the picture below, drawn by Braydon, exactly replicates the placement of Shakur’s tattoos: 2Pac on his left chest; Queen Nefertete’s head on his right chest; the number 50 over an AK 47 in the middle, and THUG LIFE in capital letters across his stomach (Figure 4):

Shakur himself recognized the appeal of street gang participation to many marginalized and disempowered youths and spoke with respect to the positive aspects of gang affiliation:

Even gangs can be positive. It just has to be organized. It has to steer away from being self-destructive to being self-productive ... We gonna start slowly but surely taking our



Figure 3. The rose.

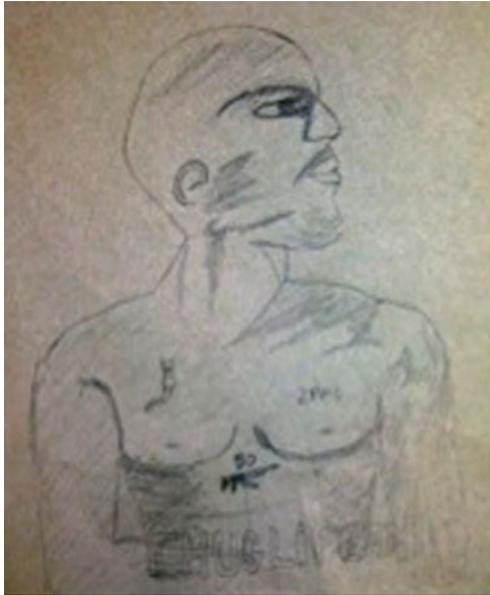


Figure 4. Shakur.

communities back. Regulate our community. Organize. Start taking care of our own. We gotta start somewhere, and I don't know about anything but this. (Shakur 2003)

Notably, Shakur's contention that the positive elements of youth gangs might be repurposed to promote pro-social tendencies is beginning to be recognized in a growing undercurrent of gang studies literature. As Payne (2006) notes, the formation of lower class African-American youth gangs constitutes a form of resiliency as the entrenchment of collective identity, and the implicit social support networks that gangs facilitate, counter the sensation of disempowerment inherent to contending with racially based stereotypes and impoverished living conditions. The youth not in school in our study reflected this collective identity in the production of similarly themed artistic work.

The testimonies collected from the youth deemed at risk by communities and encountered throughout these works resoundingly suggest that the appeal of Thug Life revolves around the ability to forge self-determined, empowering group identities and networks of mutual social support and physical protection. Despite largely corresponding with common definitions of resilience, Thug Life is seldom approached as such, possibly because of the prevalence of social narratives that correlate youth gang participation with a propensity for criminality and violence. Indeed, the prevalence of these narratives is doubtlessly reinforced by virtue of the manner in which Shakur would meet his own demise: gunned down by virtue of his alleged participation in the 'East Coast/West Coast Rap War' of the mid-1990s. While the nature of Shakur's death might undermine the positive dimensions of the 'Thug Life' philosophy for some, it also serves as a cautionary tale speaking to the persistent allure of (and dangers inherent to) reverting back to abiding by the 'Code of the Street' (Anderson 2000) when affronts to one's reputation and safety are perceived. Nevertheless, and though Shakur remains the artist best affiliated with the codified 'Thug Life' concept, many of the perceptively 'at risk' youth involved in this

study also spoke fondly of further rap and hip-hop artists who, similarly, promote resilience and movements toward pro-social identity reinforcement through their music; ranging from such classic artists as the 1980s hip-hop group Public Enemy to more contemporary figures such as Immortal Technique.

Regardless of whether or not the BATC youth participants possess an accurate and detailed knowledge of the context within which Shakur crafted the Thug Life philosophy, their self-expressive artistry speaks to the significance they attribute to the term and its utilization as a primary means of engaging in self-representational practices. Within the framework of listening to youth-driven identity and resiliency, and given the prevalence of Thug Life and Shakur-themed artwork, we suggest alternative and perhaps more effective means by which BATC community stakeholders can reach their at-risk youth; specifically, this may happen through helping youth come to understand and appreciate the pro-social dimensions of Shakur's music, the Thug Life concept, and those additional pro-resiliency elements of the rap and hip-hop musical forms. In short, pathways to resilient youth identities in First Nations communities are often linked to enhanced youth programming, especially increased cultural awareness and activities, yet youth not in school are finding expression within hip-hop culture. This demonstrates the importance of realizing youth as active and dynamic subjects interacting with complex social worlds, and bolsters the importance of discovering ways to listen to youth who have been silenced.

Hip-hop in youth programming

Originating in late 1970s New York, the hip-hop/rap genre currently stands as one of the most popular (and lucrative) Western musical forms. Largely constitutive of spoken lyrics against the backdrop of pre-recorded beats, early hip-hop provided a cost-effective platform through which marginalized African-American youth could speak to their experiences, illuminate the conventions of urban underclass culture, and aspire to 'reclaim and create a range of contested languages, identities, and powers' (Morgan and Bennett 2011, 182). Approaching hip-hop as 'an ontological process through which the artist can challenge the doctrines of institutionalized learning in order to expedite agency and to develop critical citizenship' (Biggs-El 2012, 161–162), we draw attention to the possibility that the BATC disaffected youth may already be embracing rap and Tupac Shakur's imagery of Thug Life as a means of self-identity and community. Furthering this connection may encourage school participation while embracing alternative self-definitions of resilience. In keeping with observations that 'rap has become the preferred music for many Aboriginal youth' (Lashua and Fox 2006, 268), we briefly consider two examples of successful programmatic initiatives – *The Beat of Boyle Street* and *Blueprint For Life* – that incorporate the hip-hop musical form into their services in recognition of its significance to many at-risk Aboriginal youth.

Founded in Edmonton through the combined efforts of Alberta's Boyle Street Education Centre (BSEC), Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS), and the University of Alberta's Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies in 2003, the Beat of Boyle Street program strives to 're-engage "at risk" and out-of-school youth in educational processes' (Lashua and Fox 2006, 268) through providing a for-credit course centered around inculcating participant youth with the skills related to lyrical composition and music production technologies. The Beat of Boyle Street program effectively consists of two phases, one in which participant youth learn to 'represent their concerns, ideas,

stories, culture, relationships and identities' as a means of 'coping with, making meaning of, and asserting control over life' (Wang 2010, 65) and another involving 'an expansion into the community as participants sought to teach their art to other youth ... [through] events and activities [including] student-led, workshops, performances at an Aboriginal education conference, and live dance and talent competitions' (2010, 66). Though Wang heralds the process through which the program 'clearly inspired and empowered [participants] to help other youth in need of mentorship and meaningful experiences' (2010, 67) as an indicator of success, she also speaks to the litany of external accolades that the program has attracted: a Government of Alberta crime prevention award for the program itself and the Nellie Carlson Aboriginal Youth Award and the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association Excellence in Youth Development Award for former program participants. Nevertheless, the most significant achievement of the program might rest with a newfound appreciation 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' and, further, the manner in which participants 'developed an effective community among themselves ... [and survived] by connecting to each other, providing support, and expressing their own views through their music' (Lashua and Fox 2006, 278).

Blueprint for Life uses hip-hop to engage at-risk youth in rural northern Aboriginal communities in Canada. The program reaches approximately 800–1200 reserve-based and urban youth each year and is estimated to have impacted approximately 3000 youth in over 36 projects carried out in First Nation and Inuit communities (Johnston Research, Inc. 2011). Week-long workshops are implemented in these communities in lieu of school, where young people engage with talented hip-hop dancers and take part in 'hip-hop arts practices' such as rapping, DJing, break-dancing, and graffiti arts (Forneris 2009, 5). Besides providing the youth with opportunities for challenging physical activity, the workshops teach the 'positive elements of hip-hop', specifically the values associated with its origins such as leadership, healthy lifestyles and relationships, respect, encouragement of one's peers, and pro-social community engagement (Johnston Research, Inc. 2011, 35). Blueprint for Life founder Stephen Leafloor comments that a hip-hop 'crew' is comparable to a healthier, more positive version of a 'gang', where youth can find support and identity (2012, 131). These workshops use hip-hop philosophy and culture to increase individual and community resilience, providing youth with 'life strategies and survival techniques to live healthier and more productive lives in often complex social situations where health resources and programs for youth may be scarce' (Forneris 2009, 5). The workshops also serve as an arena for discussing social issues affecting Aboriginal youth, such as bullying, self-esteem, suicide, violence, and addictions. An evaluation of the program's outcomes in three Nunavut communities based on focus groups, questionnaires, and individual interviews found that the projects were extremely well received by youth and community members, as they served to 'help youth gain a sense of self and identity, increase their confidence and self-esteem, communicate more effectively, express emotion, develop as leaders, and to have a more positive future outlook' (Forneris 2009, 5).

Although contemporary hip-hop has been commercialized in the mainstream, often disseminating messages promoting consumerism, glorifying violence, and hypersexualizing women, people experiencing disadvantage in society still recognize its potential as a tool to speak out about injustice and inequality (Johnston Research, Inc. 2011). Leafloor (2012, 133) believes that 'it is not a coincidence that First Nations cultures around the

world have embraced hip-hop and made it their own. They need it the most'. Youth and community members appreciate giving youth 'an opportunity to engage in physical activity that is not sport', alluding to the importance of creative and alternative recreational programming beyond the realm of athletics (Forneris 2009, 3). Youth who participated in the workshops commented that the program's encouragement of healthy lifestyles and behavior inspired them to improve their eating and exercise habits (Forneris 2009), and research on positive health outcomes from these community interventions has led the Type-2 Diabetes Prevention Association to partner with Blueprint for Life (Johnston Research, Inc. 2011). The success of this program suggests that arts programming based on hip-hop has the potential to be successful in engaging at-risk BATC youth, as well as youth from other communities, leading to positive health outcomes.

We propose that rap and artistic production of self-imagery related to alternative cultural forms may be embraced as a process that allows the BATC youth not currently in school to express themselves. As such, it could serve as a means to forge connections between unreachable youth and other community members and promote healthier expressions of community and belonging. The idea is to embrace what the youth know as a subaltern knowledge and help them discover their own pathway to healthier and less violent lives. Rose (1994, 101) points to the process through which rap allows artists to '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' through localized forms of discourse and narration. This may be a more 'contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless' (Rose 1994, 101). However, and as Cohen et al. (2012) note, music-based programming for at-risk youth could be optimized with the participation of 'effective leaders' who 'should be able to observe the culture of the group, connect with the group members both as humans and on a musical level, and understand their ideas, perspectives and identities' (192–93). Given the current study, we might furthermore suggest that effective leadership can best be achieved in attracting the participation of program leaders possessed of two forms of specialized knowledge: those with an intimate knowledge of the pro-social or resilience-based undercurrents of the rap and hip-hop musical genres (including a familiarity with the philosophical leanings of the 'Thug Life' concept), as well as those possessed of a familiarity with Canada's Aboriginal populations, their traditions, and the best means of extending program services in a culturally sensitive (and culturally safe) manner. Programs thus aspiring to 'reach' at-risk youth with an interest in hip-hop culture might benefit substantially from initiatives whereby potential program leaders and community stakeholders might exchange ideas and their 'situated knowledge' in attempting to deduce how to provide programs that might speak to at-risk youth while, also, reflecting the overarching interests and values of the wider community.

Concluding thoughts: expanding understanding of cultural interests and resilience

Recent trends in resilience research suggest that the reclamation and reinforcement of shared identities, especially those rooted in shared culture, serve as a significant means through which historically maltreated and socially marginalized populations might combat adversity.. As evident from dialog with BATC stakeholders, programmatic initiatives centered on promoting the development of pro-social, empowered identities largely depend upon the transmission of shared heritage and an awareness of the best

strategies through which to achieve communal betterment. These initiatives are often framed by a discourse promoting the retention of traditional heritage in regards to Canada's Aboriginal communities. Many such initiatives are meant to educate community members on the inter-generational impact of Canada's colonial enterprise, link that experience with contemporary systemic inequalities, and programmatically promote skills with which to practically contest trends in social disorganization; notions of personal empowerment and community betterment are intrinsically entwined therein. It is therefore possible to understand the position of those stakeholders who might perceive of youth with an ostensible lack of interest in engaging with their cultural and communal identities as potentially unreachable, especially so should they also demonstrate a lack of interest in formal education and respect for authority figures.

Nevertheless, the artistic projects discussed herein suggest that these youth may not be devoid of cultural interests but, rather, attracted to alternative cultural influences, in this case the rap and hip-hop musical form. However, rap and hip-hop have long-incited public anxieties stemming from the prevalence of anti-authoritative elements and the process through which hip-hop aesthetics have informed street-gang aesthetics (and vice versa). Focusing solely on these elements threatens to obscure the manner in which the musical form concurrently promotes philosophies centered on nation-building, self-empowerment, and community revitalization. Shakur's concept of Thug Life clearly demonstrates the interpretive chasm that has emerged by virtue of hip-hop's development of a resistance vernacular. Whereas the term 'thug' might conjure decidedly negative associations among members of the general public, those better initiated with hip-hop culture might view it as a celebration of self-determination and self-definition. Within the hip-hop cultural sphere, Thug Life *is* resilience.

Because all of the at-risk youth incorporated references to Thug Life and Shakur and rap into their self-expressive artwork, we propose that this affinity for his work, and hip-hop in general, can be used as a platform through which the BATC communities might mark out common ground. The Beat of Boyle Street and Blueprint for Life programs demonstrate that inculcating youth with music, lyrical, and production skills also provide opportunities to compose lyrics speaking to their personal perspectives and experiences offers a viable avenue through which to reach the seemingly unreachable. While BATC community members appreciate that contemporary Aboriginal youth do not live in a cultural vacuum, it is nevertheless possible that longstanding social narratives equating hip-hop culture with street-gang violence and dangerous youth might render stakeholders hesitant to incorporate any such influences into their programming. Thus, developing programs meant to attract youth interested in hip-hop will be predicated upon community stakeholders possessing a better nuanced understanding of the often ignored positive aspects of hip-hop culture and an appreciation as to why community youth so strongly identify with such (Johnston Research, Inc. 2011). Movements toward inter-generational knowledge translation within Aboriginal communities might improve programmatic capacities to reach these youth as well as better inform stakeholders on the manner in which hip-hop culture could be approached as a positive influence in the development of empowered identities and socio-historical cognizance. Among communities wherein Shakur serves as a particularly popular artist among youth, we suggest that his concept of Thug Life might function as a fitting platform upon which to bridge the cultural interests of at-risk youth with the overarching aims of the parent community.

Overall, our findings uphold the importance of family, increased programs, and cultural continuity as pathways to resilience. Yet, we also propose an emended, more

complicated understanding of First Nations youth who live in multifarious worlds and have access to knowledge and culture from multiple media sources and empiricism on and off reserve. This also demonstrates the importance of facilitating intergenerational communication and for the older generations to listen to what resilience means to First Nations youth who are living alongside mainstream settings. This understanding may lead to increased connections and a way to reach out to youth not in school through more relevant programming. We end with a quote from a BATC Elder, who affirms the importance of youth and other community members affirming and taking pride in an entire self:

I went back in time of the past to try and get myself back to who I am and I have to be really proud of myself because I am me. I'm a Native women ... I have Sioux in me, I have Saulteaux in me, I have the black man in me, I also have Cree ... Those are the things that I have to be really, really proud of you know. I can never be anyone that I am not, the way I was taught. And those children; this is something they have to really learn to be proud of who they are.

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Note

1. This measure was designed as part of the International Resilience Project (IRP) of the Resilience Research Centre (RRC; director, Dr Michael Ungar, Dalhousie University) in collaboration with 14 communities in 11 countries. CYRM documents unique culturally embedded factors relevant to resilience, especially those that had yet to be studied by minority world researchers. We have received permission from the RRC to implement the CYRM-28, which can easily be prepared for local use. The RRC recommends the local Advisory Group provide input into contextually relevant ways of selecting participants as well as important community-specific commentary on findings and what they may mean given local context; additional, site-specific questions are important and were added to the CYRM-28.

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