Promoting Active Citizenship through the arts and youth: Canadian Youth-Led Organizations as Beacons of Hope and Transformation

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Abstract
This essay details the pedagogical and cultural work of two youth-led organizations situated in Canada - Beat Nation and 411 Initiative for Change. Through the narratives generated by interviews with several of the organizations' artists and founders, the organizations' pedagogical work generated in cyberspace, and through artists' music, multi-media presentations, and speaking engagements in schools across Canada, we build on the critical project of reconceptualizing how youth express their awareness of what gives rise to salient social issues, such as racism, violence, environmental degradation, poverty, and gender inequalities, and how they work actively with other citizens to extend social and political rights for all. Youth-led organizations such as 411 for Change and Beat Nation seek to change the discursive realities and possibilities of hip hop by exercising it as a means of critical pedagogy. This approach supports the educational goals related to active citizenship, including solidarity, valuing the identities of minoritized populations, and a sense of belonging. We argue the organizations promote active citizenship by working to eliminate oppression confronting the global community, by guiding youth to understand the reasons for social inequality as well as the importance of working collectively to challenge injustice, and by embracing pro-social values and dispositions consistent with democracy, fairness, and equity.

Keywords: youth-led organizations, active citizenship, critical pedagogy

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At today's historical juncture, the corporate and political elite in North America wield their power to scapegoat youth for the social and economic problems, (such as poverty, crime, violence, and homelessness), that they create through globalizing capital and outsourcing labor across the globe as well as gutting social rights (such as full employment, housing, public transportation, and health care for children and other citizens). The dominant elite's chief outlet for lulling the public to believe youth are utterly redundant and disposable, waste products is through media-driven spectacles, where they falsely characterize youth, especially youth marginalized by their racial class status, as aberrant social creatures who are violent, anti-intellectual, lazy or out of control and 'up to no good' (Giroux, 2010). Consequently, through this (mis)information, the elite has swayed the public to support what Giroux calls a "war against youth." This involves the ruling elite implementing spates of draconian educational policies and practices, such as high-stakes examinations, scripted curricula, zero-tolerance initiatives, and corporate advisement/marketing strategies. This "warfare" is designed to position youth to become compliant spectators in decisions and events that perpetuate not only their alienation and oppression, but also generate the stark social realities encountered by the vast majority of global citizens.

Despite the concerted efforts by the dominant elite to reduce youth to invisible objects or make them "become subject to the dictates of the criminal justice system" (Giroux, 2010), several scholars who support critical and postmodern conceptualizations (Tereshchenko, 2010, Lister, 2008; Rasmussen and Brown, 2002) of citizenship have pinpointed how youth are, indeed, critically aware of what is spawning suffering in their schools, communities, and other social contexts as well as engaged "in action for social change, the establishment of active solidarity, and the extension of rights for all global citizens (Ross, 2007). Unlike many scholars who limit their investigation of youths' citizenship activities to being involved in typically adult and male-centered channels of voting or in formal political work, critical citizenship scholars have examined multiple social spaces in which young people "learn and experience citizenship"' (Tereshchenko, 2010). For instance, through their involvement at school, community centers, the virtual world, and in popular culture activities, critical scholars have shown that youth are far from being apathetic, narcissistic individuals who are concerned with their market-driven needs, wants or desires; rather, they are cognizant of what constitutive forces cause oppression, are actively working with their peers and adults to guide other citizens to reflect upon the sources of social maladies, and are "able to express their views across a range of citizenship issues" (Tereshchenko, 2010).

The purpose of this essay is to detail the pedagogical and cultural work of two youth-led organizations situated in Canada - *Beat Nation* and *411 Initiative for Change*. Through the narratives generated by interviews with several of the organizations' artists and founders, the organizations' pedagogical work generated in cyberspace, and through artists' music, multi-media presentations, and speaking engagements in schools across Canada, we build on the critical project of reconceptualizing how youth express their awareness of what gives rise to salient social issues, such as racism, violence, environmental degradation, poverty, gender inequalities, and how they work actively with other citizens to extend social and political rights for all citizens. We argue the organizations promote active citizenship by working to eliminate oppression confronting the global community, by guiding youth to understand the reasons for social inequality as well as the importance of working collectively to challenge injustice, and by embracing pro-social values and dispositions consistent with democracy, fairness, and equity.

Culture and Cultural Intersections

Culture, as lived individual and shared experiences, can never be condensed into neat, comparable categories. As Jones cautions, it is absolutely to be expected that some lived experiences cannot be translated or understood by people whose world views involve different cultures. This is not a problem to be solved; instead, these conditions reflect an opportunity for mutual growth. That is, the spaces of struggle, spaces where cultural intersections occur, are not prospects for homogenization or assimilation. Spaces of struggle are to be celebrated and embraced. They are locations of praxis, of energy, of possibility. The very *impossibility* translation – which usually results in colonization through the impositions of dominant narrative as a vehicle of translation – in fact represents hope. Understanding that cultural intersections create opportunities not for resolution, but for endless struggle, has positive implications:

> This has to be seen positively, given it *is engagement;* it is not *dis*-engagement. To struggle with another is to give active and proper *attention* to the other, to *relate* to the other. Even as an enemy you are *hoariri* or *hoa whawhai* – an angry 'friend': one with whom it is worth engaging, someone with whom you have a *relationship* of struggle. (Jones, 13)

No pedagogies can support transformative aims associated with active citizenship unless they support engagement between and among educators, students, and the wider society. Disengagement is the antithesis of meaningful participation. And, as Jones indicates, when cultural intersections are treated as problems to be resolved, the need for ongoing struggle is not honored: a colonized rather than a reciprocal, relationship is constructed. Active citizens must be willing to engage in struggle if they are to understand and become empowered participants in the creation of their world.

Since cultures are continually constructed and consumed by members of various groups, interrelations among these groups cannot be simplified or essentialized. It is possible, however, to explore and investigate intersections, as long as investigations honor the possibilities that emerge within the complex notion of endless struggle. It is in this context that, based on an analysis of interview data, the authors suggest that hip hop and Indigenous experiences reflect and embody cultural commonalities. Participants in Beat Nation and the 411 Initiative for Change describe the shared world view as a consistent rejection of the dominant cultural/colonial imperatives. Such a perspective provides a useful platform from which to promote active citizenship through critical pedagogies.

Culture and Citizenship

Citizenship, as defined by Ross (2007) is treated as an aspect of belonging rather than as a legal term connected with national rights. He argues that

> Citizenship and civil identity can be constructed in terms that do not necessarily relate to national identity. … Citizenship is an important aspect of our identities: it is that aspect that involves our political engagement and participation in a community. (297)

In addition, he explains that to foster active citizenship, educational endeavors must acknowledge, include, and *value* multiple identities that are constructed and produced in social settings. This is particularly significant for students who are traditionally marginalized, as are Indigenous youth. Ross explains:

…in order to be effective, education for active citizenship must address and encompass both the nature of multiple identities and the extension of civic rights to minorities, and in particular that a focus on the possible enhancement of rights will provide a powerful vehicle for learning through deliberative democracy. (pp. 286-7)

The perspectives and actions of participants in Beat Nation align well with this conception of citizenship. As members of a community of Indigenous hip-hop artists, participants embody and promote cultural heritage, while simultaneously challenging the hegemonic norms associated with the status quo. Again, Ross discusses the connections between citizenship, community, and belonging.

Citizenship implies working towards the betterment of the community one lives in through participation, volunteer work and efforts to improve life for all citizens. This is not therefore simply the same as the old-fashioned legal definition of citizenship, which was narrower, territorial and specifically related to allegiance to the government of a state (and probably related to nationality). … [T]he broader definition requires some consideration of community – or communities – and of the notion of belonging. (p. 297)

The role of community is essential to the construction and production of identity, and one's sense of belonging is deeply associated with the possibilities of establishing a sense of agency in society. Critical pedagogical approaches offer a powerful means of educating for active citizenship.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogies build on the critical project of reconceptualizing how youth express their awareness of what gives rise to salient social issues, such as racism, violence, environmental degradation, poverty, gender inequalities, and how they work actively with other citizens to extend social and political rights for all citizens. Youth and, by extension, youth culture, is frequently coupled with competing discourses. Black (2011) explains

Young people are often held up as our hope for the future, the ones who will protect our democracies and spearhead better social and environmental practices. At the same time, they are subject to a pervasive risk discourse and to a range of mechanisms designed more to govern and control them than to learn from them or let them lead. (p. 25)

A sense of critical consciousness, intentionally developed through critical pedagogies that reveal, explore, and extend understandings of social inequities and the forces that constrain active participation, provides opportunities for active citizenship to be fostered and performed. Critical consciousness enables youth to perceive and expand their own agency as it relates to their communities to which they belong as well as the communities that are dominant in society. Critical pedagogies, and the consciousness they advance, empower youth to reconcile the competing discourses that shape their social positions and responsibilities.

In contrast to the intensification of standards and standardization that permeates contemporary public schools in the U.S. and Canada, hip hop provides an alternative perspective to power and pedagogies. Gustafson (2008) asserts that "Falling short of promoting a general understanding of the complexity of culture in a democracy, the language and procedures recommended by state curriculum guides construct a template for participation that is restrictive. These judgments circumscribe participation and limit inclusion" (pp. 288-289). In her investigation of the interconnections among hip hop and

education, she reveals how hip hop creates intellectual and physical spaces for possibility and agency – possibilities that relate directly to community and critical consciousness.

After expressing concern about the ways that standardization limits the ability of youth to imagine alternatives to the status quo, Gustafson acknowledges that "Hip hop's reputation as an antisocial activity presents harsh dilemmas for the school curriculum" (p. 289). Since many educational leaders have only been exposed to antisocial forms of hip hop, which are promoted by large-scale conglomerates in mass media outlets, they generally exclude hip hop from traditional pedagogical experiences. According to Gustafson, this reinforces existing power relations that have particularly negative consequences for already marginalized youth.

> Each teaching situation has different degrees and types of limitations on participation. Consequently, there are no ready prescriptions for achieving equity. Realizing that we cannot come to a language that is completely free of the burden of distinctions between students' learning, my aim is to create a critical awareness of historically shifting definitions for music and reductive ideas associated with cognition, authenticity, diversity, and purposeful movement. (p. 292)

Indigenous hip-hop artists face particular challenges with respect to the expectation that they will link their present-day work to their heritage. And, because both Indigenous identity and hip-hop identity have been historically marginalized, this expectation is intricate and complex. In a sense, Indigenous hip-hop artists are working from a space of praxis that is doubly exclusionary: Indigenous culture and hip-hop culture have been colonized by Western influences.

> The exclusion of hip hop, in particular, provides a clear example of this limitation…, making it difficult to welcome and command the interest of the individual who reasons about music through speech, hearing, mental processes, and movement. When looked at as a social activity and an aesthetic form, hip hop is one genre that draws many students' interests and brings to light a rich array of social experiences that are ordinarily shut out of the classroom. (p. 293)

Youth-led organizations such as 411 Imitative for Change and Beat Nation seek to change the discursive realities and possibilities of hip hop by exercising it as a means of critical pedagogy. This approach supports the educational goals related to active citizenship, including solidarity, extension of civil rights, and a sense of belonging.

Beat Nation

One aspect of this article is based on an Indigenous hip hop group called Beat Nation. Beat Nation, based in Vancouver, is an outgrowth of Grunt, which is a non-profit society run by a board of working artists whose purpose is to maintain a space accessible to artists and audiences. Grunt supports a variety of initiatives around evolving concepts of community, particularly those which explore intersections between various cultural groups. The organization is funded through Heritage Canada's Gateway fund.

Methodology

Eighteen members of The Beat Nation were invited to interview for this study and six hip-hop intellectuals agreed to participate. All are females who ranged in age from 26 to 41. Four are Canadian citizens; two are citizens of the United States. All identify as First Nation, Native North American. Because of funding and scheduling constraints, interviews were conducted via Skype and digitally recorded.

The oral history was developed through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed and then analyzed using grounded theoretical methodology. In addition, document analysis of artifacts – which included lyrics, curatorial statements, artists' assertions, and public records – was conducted. Grounded theoretical approaches, based in a critical philosophical framework, were used in order to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences of study participants. Ideally, this method minimizes power differences by interrogating and exploring the experiences of participants deeply. Because investigators sought to establish authentic dialogic conversations, our interviews involved numerous moments of realization, awareness, and, ideally, education and empowerment during the narrative process. Giroux (1983) describes the underlying beliefs inherent in this type of interrelation:

> Central to such a process is the fundamental notion of critique, a notion that should inform such exchanges and processes. More specifically, critique should be organized around historical and sociological modes of analysis. That is, the "self" and the wider society must be understood as socially constructed and historically constituted through social practices that are contradictory in nature but anchored in a totality of dialectical relations, i.e. society. (p. 29)

To facilitate analysis, notes and transcriptions were imported into Nudist data analysis software. When data collection was complete and transcriptions and field notes were imported, data were read and analyzed to identify topics for coding. To develop and facilitate analysis of codes, researchers used constant comparative methods, which enabled them to "establish analytic distinctions – and thus make comparisons at each level of analytic work" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 54). To establish codes, transcriptions were first read, word-by-word and line-by-line, through about one-third of each type of data, making notes on themes that emerged in order to create tentative coding categories. This close reading was intended to "make fundamental processes explicit, render hidden assumptions visible, and [provide] new insights] (Charmaz, 2009, p. 55). Using the constant comparative method, recurring themes and motifs related to the research questions were then identified as codes.

The Indigenous hip-hop movement represented by The Beat Nation provides a space for free expression that is both unique and shared. Study participants offer insights for understanding youth identities[1] and perceptions of education that are emerging in this dynamic social and political climate. As we explore below, this work provides a distinctive perspective on the educational goals related to active citizenship. It is also linked to the critical project of reconceptualizing how youth express their awareness of what gives rise to salient social issues.

Connecting Traditional and Contemporary Culture

The potential conflicts that might emerge between Native youth and other community members who are products of diverse experiences are addressed candidly by Beat Nation Producer Glenn Alteen (2009). Here he links the traditional and the contemporary and perceives areas of conflict not as sources for division, but rather for opportunity for enlightenment and empowerment.

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[1] It is important to note that the view of youth culture represented here is defined broadly. In this study, researchers look at how social actors who consume or produce this culture, but who are not necessarily youth. This conception of youth culture clearly includes artists associated with The Beat Nation and the 411 Initiative for Change, regardless of their ages.

There has been some criticism over the years by older community members who see this influence as a break from tradition and the movement of the culture towards a pop-based mainstream assimilation. But in Beat Nation we see just the opposite happening. These artists are not turning away from the traditions as much as searching for new ways into them. Hip hop is giving youth new tools to rediscover First Nations culture. What is most striking about this work is how much of it embraces the traditional within its development.

Alteen asserts that Indigenous hip-hop artists do not reject the works of their ancestors; in fact, they *extend* it:

In many ways, the greatest achievement of Haida master carver Bill Reid was in taking the carving tradition from wood, silver and argillite into other sculptural media. The artists in Beat Nation do the same thing in their media of spray paint, live mix video, turntables, and beat boxes. There is a strong sense of activism present in the work and recognition of the responsibility the artists hold towards their communities.

The explicit union between community, art, and activism is an organizing aspect of Beat Nation. Bridging the metaphorical and the imagined with the material and the actual, Beat Nation artists and curators draw on Indigenous influences to inform and amplify the experiences and voices of today's youth.

Aboriginal artists have taken hip hop influences and indigenized them to fit Aboriginal experiences: The roots of hip hop are there but they have been ghost-danced by young Native artists who use hip hop culture's artistic forms and combine them with Aboriginal story, experience and aesthetics. (Willard, 2009)

In her curatorial essay, Willard describes the origins and aims of Beat Nation:

The influence of hip hop on marginalized inner-city youth has been written about, Gucci© handbags have been made with graffiti art and car commercials feature hip hop tracks, but the culture of hip hop still has room for independent and local transformation, able to ignite youth expression and creativity. Hip hop has been used by youth and cultural workers from the Northwest Territories to South Africa as a tool for youth empowerment and expression. (Willard, 2009, p.2)

Consistent with the principles of critical pedagogy, Beat Nation participants seek to develop agency and empowerment from the authentic, grounded experiences and perceptions of youth. Notions of cultural norms and community belonging are understood as contested, a perspective that paves the way for genuine engagement and participation. A transformational viewpoint incorporates a dialogic aim, one that aims for mutual learning and shared leadership. Such a viewpoint represents a theoretical and substantial move away from hegemonic pedagogies and toward critical pedagogies. It also represents an embrace of active citizenship because it supports a transformational, dialogic approach to community participation.

The possibilities for hope and transformation represented by groups such as Beat Nation are particularly remarkable in a socio-political context marked by marginalization of Indigenous groups. It is important to note that Indigenous communities currently exist in largely colonized global circumstances.

In Vancouver BC, the unceded territory of Coast Salish peoples and a meeting ground for many different urban Aboriginal youth, hip hop has been an inspiration to art and politics since the early shows in the 90s…In Vancouver's slice of unceded Coast Salish territories, the influx of Native female … represent hip hop with a message. Hip hop as activism has been a driving force in Aboriginal expression. (Willard, 2009)

The transformational possibilities exemplified by the participants of Beat Nation are realized as efforts to use art as a de-colonizing energy come to fruition. Despite the fact that these hip-hop artists work and live in spaces that have been stripped from their community, they refuse to surrender to hopelessness and despair. Instead, Beat Nation participants seize traditional and contemporary culture, remixing and remaking it to express their past, their present, and their hopes for the future. By engaging in these activities – activities that involve art as public intervention and subversive performance – members of Beat Nation seek to build on and express contradictions and connections among nature, society, culture, and identity.

Rap artist and Beat Nation member Rapsure Risin explains how this work integrates and amplifies possibilities for transformation through critical consciousness:

Attraction to music comes from beyond the mind. This music comes from beyond the mind. A strong belief in walking the earth as a complete human being, with all four aspects intact – Mind, Spirit, Body, Emotions – sets the bar for living that much higher. These aspects are present in all of us. When we are aware and fully conscious of our true presence, we are capable of infinite possibilities. …We are here for more than the material, we are here for more than the knowledge, we are here for more than we could ever imagine. Imagine Rapture, being carried away to ecstasy, imagine rising to your highest state of being… (Beat Nation Trax, 2009)

In a similar vein, Tania Willard asserts explicit associations among the histories and traditions of Indigenous culture and contemporary hip-hop artists. She argues that today's artists do not represent a rejection of their heritage; they honor their ancestors while simultaneously constructing and producing their own culture. Culture, in this sense, is not produced in a linear, periodic manner. Culture exists contemporaneously: new constructions exist in the context of previous constructions. New voices and identities are informed and constituted of the social interactions and texts that preceded them.

Medicine beats and ancestral rhymes fuel indigenous hip hop, art and expression. Culture and identity are in a constant state of flux; new forms created today are becoming the culture of our grandchildren – hybridized, infused and mixed with older 'traditions'. We continue to shift, grow and change. Whether the influences are hip hop or country music, the roots of the expression go back to cultural story, indigenous language, land and rights, and the spirit of our ancestors.

This connection is not static, however. The connections and extensions these artists seek and construct cross boundaries of time and space, building – not *re*building, but creating as a continuous process that resists forces of exclusion by being intentionally inclusive.

Our ancestors must be dancing for us: To see our culture thrive and survive they must be dancing to our beats. Like the beats of our sacred drums, we echo our ancestors in the expression of culture regardless of medium, whether electronic beats or skins, natural pigments or neon spray cans, beads or bling, break dancing or round dancing: We do it as an expression of who we are, as indigenous peoples. (Willard, 2009)

This community of Beat Nation artists provides both a model of how critical pedagogy functions in today's world and an example of active citizenship. Its members embody a transformational approach to the world, seeking to understand, express, and interrupt social inequities by appropriating the language and forces of colonization that threaten to assimilate and homogenize cultural and individual identities until they are incapable of engaging in meaningful democratic endeavors.

Hip hop artist Kinnie Starr encapsulates the role that hip hop has played for her with respect to exploring the interrelated worlds of music, identity, ancestry, and culture.

Making hip hop offered me a controlled environment where I was able to clear the clutter from my mind. Huge questions about the way society is structured come clearer to me from writing rhymes.

Writing rhymes affords wordplay, metaphor and making light of huge topics like not being connected to my Native ancestors. On my first album in '96 I wrote, "the Big Boys went out of style/ and so Pavement lines the roads now/ with indifferent reference to the past and preference/ of white pop trash and over abundance/ but where are my ancestors?" More than ten years later I continue to write about love, identity, family and history.

The notion of "love" recurs throughout the work of Beat Nation participants. Clearly intended to extend the Western conception of romantic attachment, Beat Nation artists refer to "love" as a powerful force that can be engaged to connect across time and space. It is a productive form of energy that, particularly coupled with critical consciousness, can strengthen human bonds and counteract forces of injustice. When considered as an act of human agency intended to transform life within a community, "love" can be understood as an aspect of active citizenship

While acknowledging the complicated intersections of identity, citizenship, and culture, Kinnie Starr (2009) notes the empowering possibilities of hip hop. Specifically, she engages in her work Beat Nation participants and the public in order to enact her own life mission:

To a woman who carries Native blood but is mostly white by blood quantum, hip hop is a world where story-telling allows me to be frank about my questions, my spirit, and my life mission, **which is that people should come together**. (emphasis in original)

In this excerpt, Starr connects the past, the present, and the future. In an attempt to fulfill her mission, she engages in critical pedagogies to interrogate her own experiences and then uses hip hop to express the thoughts and feelings that result. Clearly in concert with the aims of Beat Nation, these actions and stories reflect the transformational possibilities of authentic active citizenship.

The 411 Initiative for Change:
Promoting Active Citizenship through the Arts and Focusing on Youth

In addition to document analysis of artifacts – which included lyrics, You Tube videos, artists' and organizers' assertions and public records – one of the researchers (Brad) conducted interviews with two of the organization's founders and two of the organization's current artists. A qualitative research framework was employed because it allows researchers to capture the experiences and subjective experiences and interpretations of social phenomena as well as establishes the participants rather than researchers as the experts in the study

(Creswell, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). The interview method employed in this study allowed the participants to share their experiences with creating or taking part in youth-lead organizations and being situated in oppressive contexts during their childhood.

The researcher (Brad) also engaged in telephone exchanges with the participants. This allowed the participants to clarify any ambiguous information from the transcripts. It also allowed the participants to provide further information on their experiences with youth, schools, and social activism. Next, both authors examined the transcripts to find common themes within the participants' narratives. The data collection process was completed when the authors examined the youth-led organization's websites for additional information that focused on the organization's pedagogical and cultural work.

For over 12 years, the 411 Initiative for Change has been actively involved in schools and communities across Canada, in communities across Africa, and in the virtual world in order to create a social world based on the ideals of diversity, freedom and democracy, instead of on the dominant ideals of individualism, greed, and competitiveness. Specifically, the 411 directors and socially-consciousness artists promote active forms of citizenship by bringing awareness to what constitutive forces cause stark social realities for the vast majority of the world's citizens, by highlighting why it is necessary to extend civic rights for all global citizens, and by illuminating how youth can generate supportive communities--in the virtual world, in schools and their communities--predicated on eradicating human oppression. Here, Tamara Dawit, a founder of the organization and currently the Executive Director, captures the key focus of the organization

> 411 is a Canadian arts-based organization founded by a group of young people interested in using art to engage young people in social commentary and advocacy. 411 has worked with members of the Canadian arts, music and film industry to produce quality arts programming fusing the content of Canadian NGO's and charities working on international development issues affecting young people both in Canada and around the world. 411 aims to provide a platform using the arts as a medium for the voices and ideas of young people to be heard on the world stage.

Tamara recognizes the potential to change the social world lies in guiding youth to hold a critical understanding of what gives rise to social inequalities and in employing arts to give youth a platform "to be heard on the world stage." However, the organization's directors, along with the artists, are cognizant that it is not an essay task to guide young people to understand institutional forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, gender inequalities, classism, and homophobia, are systemic rather than personal in nature. They also recognize it is difficult nudging youth to become politically engaged in their schools and communities for the purpose of improving the quality of life for all citizens. In essence, they realize many youth have been inculcated to believe incorrectly the social world is fair and open where social and economic success is based upon one's effort and intelligence. Consequently, many youth do not believe there is an immediate need to engage in active forms of citizenship, such as working in solitary with those who are committed to extending civil rights for all citizens, to eliminating oppressive conditions that spawn human suffering, and to engendering a global community based upon respect, diversity, and belonging.

To guide their youth-based audience to reflect upon the nature of their world as well as to understand key tenets associated with active forms of citizenship, the 411 members employ arts, music, lyrics, and multimedia presentations. They capture how global youth grapple with oppression on numerous levels, as they are individuals who are the most exploited and experience the most social and economic oppression at today's historical moment. Below, Tamara addresses some of the societal issues that the 411 foregrounds to its audience in order to give a more personalized perspective of why they must become educated

about what causes oppression and why they must be active, rather than playing "a very tokenistic role," in building a just society.

> Some of the most critical issues impacting young people, both in Canada and internationally, relate back to the basic rights of young people as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child. In Canada and other countries youth play a very tokenistic role in policy making (if they play any role at all) – especially in the formation of policy that directly impacts young people. Other critical issues including HIV/AIDS (infection and stigma) which is further impacted by poverty – both which are real issues affecting young people even in a "developed" country like Canada. The final issue which 411 has noted through our programming in Canada and overseas relates to integration and belonging (faced by immigrant and refugee populations)

Community Building and its Link to Promoting Active Citizenship

The artists and directors of the 411 also understand the importance of building a supportive culture that is based upon openness, sharing, and caring. One key focus in building this community is through the 411 members readily sharing their experiences of struggle and marginalization through their artistic work and presentations as well as through their direct communication with young people. These individuals, due to being marginalized on the structural axes of race, class, gender, and/or sexuality, have endured oppressive conditions growing up in Canada, in their communities, and in their familial contexts. Therefore, the 411 members' candor with how social forces have led to their own personal struggles as well as to their resiliency to make the world a better place positions youth to freely share "their own struggles, joys and concerns." Here Eternia, one of the many artists involved in the 411 Initiative for Change, details how she engenders authentic and genuine relationships with youth. She shares with them her own authentic experiences with pain, joy, and sadness.

> Really, just watching how the youth get into our presentations is very positive. The interaction and engagement is truly inspiring. Young people are smart and empathetic and aware. Every day it inspires me to learn more, know more, and be a better example. Young people are looking to me for answers. I know many women and girls have approached me and reached out to me, expressing how my music mirrors many of their experiences, such as pain, sadness, joy, and others. They say, "It's like you wrote my life story in your songs." That happens a lot. I think people crave authenticity and genuineness. I provide that for a lot of people. I'm just me.

For Eternia, the pain and sorrow she experienced emanated from growing up in a poor multicultural Canadian neighborhood. She also witnessed firsthand how domestic violence took major physical and emotional tolls on her mother and other family members. To break away from the pain and sorrow, she sought her own path by leaving her household at age fifteen. Despite dealing with the social, emotional, and physical costs associated with being impoverished for most her life, she completed high school and college with outstanding grades. That is why many "young people" feel comfortable looking to her "for answers" for the suffering they encounter in their own lived worlds.

The artists and directors also realize they must focus on the interests and concerns of their audience, if they are to build a sustained community that is committed to building equalitarian schools and a just society. This is done by first employing the technological modalities, such as YouTube, Facebook, music, and videos, that youth generally harness to communicate and to understand themselves and their social world on a daily basis.

Second, the organization engages in dialogue with youth to keep culturally-relevant and youth-centered. Over the past decade, the organization has, in several cases, acted upon the suggestions put forth by youth. It now incorporates contemporary issues that young people perceive are impacting them as well as new cultural forms consumed and produced by young adults. For example, based on youths' feedback, the organization generated a "video commentary with girls in countries around the world, theater, music performance and audience participation" for the purpose of giving girls across the globe a space to highlight "both their struggles and successes in impacting change as local heroes" (http://www.whatsthe411.ca/). The organization also generated a 411 TV program to help educate girls, their family members, and educators about "domestic issues affecting girls, such as body image, self-esteem, racism, careers, healthy relationships and bullying. The program takes the format of a mock live-to-air TV talk show, mixing video, theatre and music with live interviews to relay positive images of girls and to offer real-life testimonies from Canadian girls and women" (Cunha, 2011). Moreover, based on youths' suggestions, the organization is contemplating reaching out to punk artists who are committed to fostering youth consciousness and activism. By continually acknowledging and respecting the diverse ideas and experiences of the youth who support the 411 initiative for change, the organization believes it will stay relevant, young, and positive for many years to come.

The organization also recognizes that its vision for improving the lives of youth and people across the globe can only be actualized if it gains support from the powerbrokers who control access to educative spaces in schools and in communities across Canada. Since many of the powerbrokers who control knowledge production and access to space in and outside schools are from the dominant culture, they often view minoritized youth through pernicious stereotypical representations promulgated by corporate conglomerates in the music industry and mass media. According the organization's Program Director, Patrick McCormack, this fuels the youth artists to smash these "stereotypes," as he believes getting the powerbrokers to look beyond the stereotypes is vital to building credibility with multiple institutions, particularly schools. Most often, the powerbrokers' initial misunderstanding or skepticism about the organization is replaced with acceptance and encouragement. According to Tamara:

> Teachers are often wary of us when we arrive. For example they find out the project is being run by a group of young people or, in some all-white parts of Canada, people of color (we actually had a teacher in Nova Scotia tell a presenter that the school had never had a black person come and talk to the students). These things make the principals and administers look visually worried before the show starts. However, after the show, they are always happy with the project and many of those schools have invited us back. Basically our group defies the stereotype of what guest speakers to high school are supposed to look like.

A Path to Social Justice: 411 Members as Cultural Workers

In addition to building a supportive community that guides youth to recognize the systemic nature of injustice, that engages in sustain dialogue with youth to support their interests and needs, and that builds alliances with adults inside and outside of schools to gain support for its initiatives, the members of 411 Initiative for Change engage in sustained forms of activism designed to build a better global society. For instance, Toronto-based, hip-hop intellectual Rochester has attempted to ameliorate the dehumanizing effects of youth imprisonment by implementing a one-of-a-kind program in Brookside youth jail in Cobourg, Ontario. The artist helped several youth produce their own music videos and hip-hop songs. The long range goals of the project are to release the inmates' singles and invest any profits in the kids' education, "so they can go to college and learn more" (Mendleson, 2010). The more subtle impact of Rochester's activism has parlayed into altering social relationships between

inmates and guards: During "workshops the boys are attentive, "asking questions, laughing, joking," says Rochester. "The guards, they're breathing a sigh of relief" (Mendleson, 2010).

The activist work of the artists has also provided the impetuous for youth to engage in cultural work in their schools and other communities. For instance, Dwayne Morgan, a spoken word artist and activist from Toronto, notes how the organization's global tours have inspired numerous global youth to formulate their own youth-led initiatives or join other social collectives, which are dedicated to eradicating human misery. In fact, the artists' activism has spurred youth to "start chapters of Amnesty International in their schools."

Re-envisioning Youth and Citizenship: Concluding Thoughts

As demonstrated in this essay, the dominant forms of citizenship promoted by schools and dominant political and economic leaders---voting and promoting a nationalistic identity based on Eurocentric values--have little prospect of ameliorating the intense suffering, social inequalities, and alienation experienced by citizens across the globe. The transnational elite's project of globalizing capital and outsourcing labor across the globe as well as gutting social rights and entitlements of all citizens can only be subverted by citizens having a reflexive understanding of what causes the world to look so bleak and engaging in dissent movements which are predicated on providing rights and social entitlements for all citizens. Fortunately, Beat Nation and the 411 Initiative for Change provide educators and other concerned citizens guideposts for altering unjust social arrangements, for valuing the identities of minoritized citizens and engendering a sense of agency and belonging for all global citizens, and for engaging youth in activist pursuits that are personally empowering and socially transformative. Beat Nation engages hip-hop to generate a transformational approach to the world, seeking to understand, express, and interrupt social inequities by appropriating the language and forces of colonization that threaten to assimilate and homogenize cultural and individual identities until they are incapable of engaging in meaningful democratic endeavors. On the other hand, the 411 Initiative for Change strategically employs multimedia presentations in schools, in communities, and in the virtual world, creates alliances with educational and community leaders, and engages in cultural work across the globe to guide young people, their parents, and schoolteachers to become critically aware and actively involved in building a more just social world. We now call on other scholar-activists to mine the cultural manifestations and cultural work generated by youth-led organizations across the globe. We believe they may provide fertile sites to (re)conceptualize youth in a socially-generative light, to understand more fully what policies, practices, and structures make the world miserable for youth and the vast majority of global citizens, and to ensure citizenship formation is predicated on challenging the status quo, rather than keeping in place citizenship formulations that keep youth complicit in their own marginality.

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