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# A Phenomenological Study on the Experience of Composing Rap Lyrics among 'at-risk' Youth

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

A Phenomenological Study on the Experience of Composing  
Rap Lyrics among 'at-risk' Youth

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

Existing literature exploring the integration of Hip Hop in therapeutic contexts predominately focuses on utilizing the music in a receptive fashion, while a limited amount of literature has explored active techniques (i.e., lyric composition). Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological method, this study explored the experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics of young people who have been labelled 'at risk' (N=5). From the participant interviews emerged seven categories related to the experience of composing Hip Hop: (a) Hip Hop as a constant in one's life, (b) Descriptions of the composing process, (c) Hip Hop song composition is therapeutic, (d) Hip Hop supports expression, (e) Remixing the story: Constructing and living the story we tell of ourselves, (f) Acts of resistance: 'Each one, teach one', and (g) Delivery of content: Messages within messages. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and implications are offered for the clinical social work context.

*Keywords:* Hip Hop, narrative therapy, lyric composition, clinical social work

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I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. David Nicholas. Your authentic way of moving through the academic world has taught me much about conducting research, to strive for a deeper understanding and purpose, with an aim to move toward transformation. Your vast intellect was an immense help to me throughout this process, and your genuine curiosity and excitement about my topic was truly invaluable. Thank you.

To my love, Michael Wickson, what a precious gift you are. You are always my number one fan. Your unwavering belief in me has helped me to believe in myself. You have provided a listening ear and shown a genuine fascination in my work from the get-go, a motivation I could not have found elsewhere. I am grateful to have you by my side as we walk through this life. Thank you.

To my sweet girl Mae, I will be forever grateful for your companionship and love. Thanks for being with me during the long writing hours and providing calm and balance.

To my family: I thank you for your cheers from afar, they were heard and appreciated.

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the Hip Hop community who has been doing this work well before I began my thesis. When I began this thesis journey I felt it was critical that I attempt to give back and be involved in the Edmonton Hip Hop community. While I still have much work to do in this area, what I have been witness to is a community ‘doing the work’ regardless of what occurs in academia. The various Hip Hop events that happen in this city (Hip Hop in the Park, Cypherwild, CIPHER5, Sampler Cafè, to name a few) build community, reduce isolation of young people, and organize around the tenets of Hip Hop, creating a positive environment that celebrates the skills of individuals and knowledge of the community. I would

like to acknowledge the community organizers who have devoted countless hours to community and creating spaces of connectedness and belonging.

There have been numerous practitioners and researchers who have paved the way for the development of my thesis. Their work continues to inspire the helping professions to reach further. I would like to acknowledge their work and influence: Dr. Don Elligan; Dr. Edgar H. Tyson; Tomás Alvarez; Stephen ‘Buddha’ Leafloor; Dr. Ian Levy; Dr. Raphael Travis; and Dr. Elliot Gann. I recognize that in this short list I am excluding the outstanding work of many individuals and groups and therefore would like to acknowledge all practitioners in the helping field who bring creativity to their work, or are thinking about bringing creativity to their work.

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Hip Hop is not dependent on institutions and research; it will continue to resist and fight for justice as it always has. I do believe we, as social workers, have much to learn from Hip Hop but must be cautious and thoughtful in how we go about this work.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to those in our community who are our story-keepers and story(re)tellers.

## **Glossary of terms**

### **Hip Hop:**

Hip Hop is a culture that emerged in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Hip Hop is often described as consisting of four fundamental elements: emceeing, deejaying, break-dancing, and graffiti. A fifth element, 'knowledge', has also been identified with Hip Hop culture. As such, Hip Hop is understood beyond being a musical genre as, "a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world, and an aesthetic..." (Aldridge & Stewart, 2005, p. 190).

### **Cypher:**

The cypher is a gathering of emcees, beatboxers, and/or break-dancers in a circle to freestyle. The participants in cypher will all take turns performing until all those present have had the opportunity to share (Emdin, 2011).

### **Freestyle:**

Freestyling is a form of improvised rapping as opposed to rapping lyrics that have been composed.

### **Emceeing:**

Emceeing is the vocal element of Hip Hop. The term is derived from the abbreviation MC (master of ceremonies) (Adaso, 2016). Adaso (2016) provides several common elements to emceeing: rhyme scheme, delivery, breath control, and word play and notes, "An emcee is a person who raps to inspire people with clear, concise and compelling content" (Who is an Emcee section, para. 1).

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## **Epigraph**

In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly - in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.

Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (1997, p. 46)

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Hip Hop music has been a social movement since its inception, a platform for sociopolitical commentary that challenges grand narratives. Hip Hop has been viewed as a consciousness-raising tool in addressing structural inequalities and systemic oppression that exist in society. Communities, groups, and individuals who are marginalized and who have been disregarded and silenced by institutions of power have been at the centre of the creation and emergence of Hip Hop (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). It is important for helping professionals to consider Hip Hop beyond the surface, and recognize its ability to be a medium of resistance to oppressive social structures and dominant discourses. Subjugated knowledge will not often be found in written histories, but rather conveyed through “oratory forms such as lectures, speeches, testimonies, sermons, music, oral histories, jokes, folklore, and popular childhood rhymes...” (Chepp, 2012, p. 223). Therefore, as content to affirm the knowledge and narratives of clients, it is crucial that these oratory forms be included in therapeutic contexts.

The global reach of Hip Hop seems to support the notion that the genre’s influence has transcended borders; it is a global movement and occurs in diverse countries and cities, from Austria (Hafez, 2016) to Sweden (Serhede & Söderman, 2012) to South Africa (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012) to Edmonton, Alberta (MacDonald, 2012). The popularity of the genre has made Hip Hop increasingly recognized as a valuable tool in work with youth. The language of Hip Hop is familiar to youth, likely more so than traditional therapeutic language. This familiarity offers practitioners the opportunity to genuinely connect with young clients at their level, while providing clients an approach that broadens ideas of meaningful communication. Hip Hop is in a unique position to be incorporated in therapeutic work with youth who have been labelled ‘at risk’. Although rap music is often critiqued as having a negative influence on youth

behaviour, current literature asserts that these criticisms overlook positive influences the genre has on engaging youth culture (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009). Typically, practitioners find it difficult to engage youth who have been labelled as ‘at risk’ in therapy (Tillie Allen, 2005), which could be attributed to relied upon methods of engagement by the individual practitioner or the agency (Ciardiello, 2003). The use of Hip Hop allows potential understanding of youth and appears to alleviate some of the hesitancy of youth to participate; in the literature, this has been credited to the pre-existing presence of Hip Hop, and its relevancy, in the lives of many young people (Ciardiello, 2003; Levy, Emdin, & Adjapong, 2017; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002).

### **Study Objective**

This study sought to explore the perceptions of ‘at risk’ youth regarding the experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics. It was anticipated that the study would inform potential implications for clinical social work practice, and yield findings in such a way that professionals working with youth (clinical social workers, teachers, youth workers, etc.) could gain a better understanding of the potential contribution of Hip Hop in providing therapy and programming to youth who have been labelled as ‘at risk’.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my study:

- How do ‘at risk’ youth experience the process of composing original Hip Hop lyrics?
- What is the meaning and/or value of composing Hip Hop lyrics as described by ‘at risk’ youth?
- How does the experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics help or hinder youth in everyday life/behaviour?

In this thesis, the terms rap music and Hip Hop music will be used interchangeably, however, the literature repeatedly acknowledges Hip Hop as a culture with five core elements of turntablism (deejaying), b-boying (breakdancing), graffiti, emceeing, and knowledge (Gann,

2010; Kobin & Tyson, 2006; Travis & Bowman, 2011). Further, because Hip Hop is regarded as a culture, Hip Hop will be capitalized throughout this thesis (Lightstone, 2012).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review will examine some of the relevant research on treatment approaches for youth who are considered ‘at risk’, the emergence of Hip Hop therapy, the integration of Hip Hop into therapy with youth, and the composition of original lyrics within and beyond the therapeutic context. Relative to earlier areas of focus, the final area focusing on the composition of Hip Hop lyrics, will reflect a more comprehensive and in-depth review of the literature. Overall, the purpose of this literature review is to provide evidence related to the impact of Hip Hop as a therapeutic tool for ‘at risk’ youth.

### **The Term ‘At Risk’**

Improving service to young people requires reflection on the social construction of language commonly used within practice. The notion of ‘at risk’ is an example of a common term potentially laden with meaning, but which may be commonly and uncritically used when working with young people in various contexts, and therefore warrants examination.

Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) wrote that the term ‘at risk’ remains ambiguous and found that views about what the term means demonstrated, “unexamined assumption[s] that impede[s] reflexivity and systemic analysis.” (p. 41). The term is often used by professionals as a blanket statement (Allen, 2014) to describe youth who have been identified to be on a perceived negative trajectory, or to describe youth who have been identified by professionals as experiencing challenges in an array of areas (social, emotional, etc.) (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). “Deficit ideologies” (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012, p. 35) support rigid and misleading perceptions of young people, particularly young people from communities that have been marginalized by white supremacy and the resulting inequity of access and opportunity. Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) argued that, “The discourse of risk ignores institutionalized structures of inequality and a

systemic analysis of what places youth at risk.” (p. 34).

Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) further argued for the deconstruction of the notions of ‘risk’ and ‘at risk’ in order for professionals to consider their potential complicity in participating in and reifying individual pathology rather than an understanding of structural conditions, such as oppression, that contribute to individual conditions. The connotations of ‘risk’ and ‘at risk’ are shaped by raced and classed discourses, where white, middle class, suburban, and able-bodied are understood as the norm and membership outside of such groups is often defined and understood as ‘at risk’ (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). These taken-for-granted notions are limited and prevent a systemic understanding of risk and therefore works to prevent approaches targeting broad scale change in an effort to alleviate risk (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012).

### **Treatment Approaches for Youth Considered ‘At Risk’**

All forms of therapy are concerned with providing guidelines for effective prevention and intervention work; in this case, with children and youth (van der Kolk, 2005; Ungar, 2001; Gann, 2010). Despite these noble aims, it is not uncommon for therapeutic approaches with youth to closely align with medical discourse, with a focus on individual pathology and diagnosis. For instance, youth who have experienced trauma are often (re)framed through a medicalized lens that focuses on pathology and are viewed as ‘damaged’ as a result of their experience (Grondin, 2011). Traditional therapies tend to focus on recognizing the presenting issue or problem as an internal deficiency (Ungar, 2001), implying that the effects of adverse experiences are directly and permanently located in the body and mind of the individual who has had these adverse life experiences (Grondin, 2011).

From a social justice lens, it appears critical that these discourses are analyzed, and concepts such as ‘pathology’ are understood in the broader context of power (Combs &

Freedman, 2012). Such discourses can potentially limit how the experiences of young people are understood and addressed by the helping professional and the young person, framing an individual's behaviour determined by standards of 'normalcy' upheld by these discourses (Vodde & Gallant, 2002). Accordingly, these medicalized discourses arguably are not universally untrue; rather the issue here is that they may restrict the individual to uni-dimensional accounts, ignoring/obscuring a more complex and nuanced human experience. Combs and Freedman (2012) described these single stories as "thin stories" (p. 1037) and contend that it is not unusual for clients to focus on these singular-oriented stories when consulting a therapist.

Therapeutic processes remain heavily influenced by the biomedical perspective, particularly in the context of approaches to mental health (Deacon, 2013). This perspective posits that unhealthy and 'deviant' behaviour is likely a result of a neurological chemical imbalance or cognitive impairment that requires pharmaceutical interventions (Solli, 2014). It has been argued by Ciradiello (2003) that treatments and interventions that are predominantly pathology-based result in problem-focused therapeutic programming, which can often deter adolescents from seeking or participating in therapy. Resistance to therapeutic environments is often met with negative labels, whereby youth are identified in terms such as resistant or 'deviant' (Solli, 2014). Roychoudhury and Gardner (2012) stated that researchers are finding that youth who display a "righteous anger toward oppression" (p. 243), via behaviour that resists treatment approaches, are often misdiagnosed as having conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and/or oppositional defiant disorder. Roychoudhury and Gardner (2012) examined the causes of such misdiagnoses and argue that many existing therapeutic approaches and treating professionals may not afford sufficient consideration to the complexity of individual lived experience nor offer alternative, corresponding interventional options and supports.

Contrary to the idea that individual pathology is the root of an adolescent's undesirable behaviour (van der Kolk, 2005), Ciradiello (2003) presented the notion that adolescents who are often left without relevant therapeutic support remain vulnerable to repeated undesirable behaviours, and are labelled as 'resistant' when refusing to participate in pathology-based therapy. Within this orientation, both the therapist's approach and the prevailing discourses that inform the approach to therapy tend to remain unchallenged. It is also important to keep in mind that the label 'at risk' has generally been externally imposed upon individuals. Thus, being labelled 'at risk' itself may impose risk for a particular sequelae of interventional response that is associated with this imposed label. Furthermore, if the client perceives an intervention as insensitive to his/her needs or unreflective of their daily lives, it is unlikely that it will be productive or successful (Decarlo & Hockman, 2008; Tillie Allen, 2005). Therefore, it is suggested that therapists not impose limiting labels that nuance care, and that they integrate the interests and needs of adolescents as a strategy for engagement in promoting positive youth development.

### **Hip Hop as a Therapeutic Activity**

Hip Hop therapy that incorporates rap music as a treatment modality is an example of integrating the interests and needs of adolescents. Hip Hop therapy has been identified as a "highly beneficial therapeutic tool" (Blank, 2008) that promotes positive development (Travis & Deepak, 2011) in youth who have been labelled 'at risk' or 'high risk'. McFerran (2012) argued that Hip Hop may be an important resource for therapeutic approaches that have a positive and health oriented focus rather than a symptom (pathology based) focus.

Many young people rely on music to aid in fulfilling social and emotional needs (North & Hargraves, 2000). Different genres of music are often perceived by outside audiences and researchers as potentially having a causative influence, linking negative behaviour (e.g.,

aggressiveness, suicidality, etc.) with the music (McFerran, 2012). Hip Hop is sometimes viewed as controversial (Elligan, 2012) relative to the violent, misogynistic, and homophobic messages that exist in some of the lyrics and video imagery (Hill Collins & Blige, 2016; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tillie Allen, 2005; Yancey & Hadley, 2012). Critics of the genre have associated Hip Hop with detrimental outcomes among listeners (Sullivan, 2003), and researchers have presented the genre as a predictor of negative behaviour among young people (Miranda & Claes, 2004). However, McFerran (2012) contended, “The idea that music leads to negative behavior is not well supported, and therefore the suggestion that Hip-Hop music may be contraindicated for vulnerable teens is a simplistic reading of a complex topic” (p. 174).

The literature argues that Hip Hop is culturally relevant to youth, and therefore an effective strategy when building a therapeutic alliance with adolescent clients (Gann, 2010; Kobin & Tyson, 2006; Travis & Deepak, 2011). The ability to create a therapeutic alliance can be crucial: the strength of the therapeutic relationship is often acknowledged as having a significant influence on treatment effectiveness (Green, 2006; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Kobin & Tyson, 2006; Lambert & Barley, 2001). Additionally, social work values and practice often emphasize the importance of starting where clients are at; particularly important when engaging with clients who are reluctant to participate in therapy (Kobin & Tyson, 2006). As noted earlier, ‘at risk’ adolescents have been identified as being difficult to engage in therapy (Gann, 2010), and/or reluctant to participate (Ciradiello, 2003; Iwamoto et al., 2007). Kobin and Tyson (2006) offered an explanation as to how Hip Hop can redress this risk and achieve desired engagement: “it is possible that listening or creating music in a group setting could trigger client dialogue and exploration of relevant issues that otherwise would be difficult to identify or access.” (p. 344). Reportedly, when youth are given the opportunity to communicate through Hip Hop, whether

analyzing lyrics or creating their own lyrics, practitioners report that the lyrics act as a ‘breakthrough’ for discussion (Blank, 2008).

Using Hip Hop as a strategy for enhancing mental health and wellbeing has shown promise as a therapeutic modality, improving, “individual, group, family mental and behaviour health as well as (serving as) a mobilizing tool for broader social change and community wellbeing.” (Travis & Deepak, 2011, p. 206). Reported goals of Hip Hop as a form of intervention consist of empowerment and improvement of self-efficacy for disempowered clients (Gann, 2010; Kobin & Tyson, 2006; Travis & Deepak, 2011).

It is posited that Hip Hop culture can be a medium for desired therapeutic outcomes among youth as understood through an individual and community empowerment framework (Travis & Deepak, 2011). Travis and Deepak (2011) contended that social work practice can benefit from understanding how Hip Hop supports or inhibits positive youth development. Positive youth development has been described as, “optimal physical, social, emotional, and cognitive/intellectual wellbeing with the potential for ‘thriving’ over time.” (Travis & Deepak, 2011, p. 204). The positive youth development framework is identified with ‘the five Cs’: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Travis & Deepak, 2011). Further, Travis and Deepak (2011) contended that the better able young people are to meet development needs the more likely they are to contribute or be of service to their environment, therefore the five Cs can create a sixth C: contribution. This idea of contributing to one’s environment introduces a social justice component to the work. To that end, the authors provided song indexes to demonstrate the ability of Hip Hop songs to encompass these six dimensions. The resulting framework suggests that Hip Hop songs express dimensions of empowerment, self-esteem, growth and resiliency, suggesting that the narratives presented in the music translate to a

model (individual and community empowerment framework) of practice for social workers that engages youth in positive development (Travis & Deepak, 2011; Travis, 2012).

### **Integrating Hip Hop into Direct Practice with Youth**

The strong influence of Hip Hop in the lives of youth places it as a promising therapeutic approach for work with youth who have been labelled ‘at risk’. Researchers and practitioners in therapeutic settings are increasingly acknowledging the ability of rap music to increase the accessibility of therapy to youth who relate to, and participate in, Hip Hop culture (Elligan, 2012). Given that Hip Hop seems omnipresent in the lives of many young people and reflects a genre of music that speaks to the life stories of young people (Ierardi & Jenkins, 2012), it seems prudent and strategic for practitioners to become familiar with and leverage this medium of interest within the available compendium of treatment paradigms worthy of study and implementation (Elligan, 2000). Redressing a frequently reported tradition of difficulty to engage some youth in therapy, Hip Hop offers promise in potentially easing some of the hesitance of youth to participate.

### **A Brief History of Rap Music in Therapeutic Contexts**

Hip Hop has been in existence for over four decades, but was not formally identified as a therapeutic tool until the early 2000’s (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009). It is only recently that practitioners within the mental health field have considered the value of Hip Hop as a form of expressive therapy (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012). Over the past decade and a half rap music has become increasingly acknowledged as an effective, although unconventional tool (Lightstone, 2012), to utilize in therapeutic work with youth who have been deemed ‘at risk’. Hip Hop has been adapted for therapeutic approaches in various ways, such as creating raps

relative to therapeutic issues and analyzing therapeutic-oriented rap (lyrical) content (Veltre & Hadley, 2012).

### **Outcomes of Hip Hop as a Therapeutic Tool**

Gonzalez and Hayes (2009) contended that rap music can be a powerful stimulus for change when utilized in therapy with ‘at risk’ youth. This contention has been supported and echoed in several pieces of literature over the past decade through exploring the practice value of Hip Hop (Blank, 2008; Ciradiello, 2003; Decarlo & Hockman, 2003; Elligan, 2000; Gann, 2010; Iwamoto, Creswell, & Caldwell, 2007; Travis, 2012; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002).

Since the formal recognition of rap as a tool that can be used in therapeutic approaches, several studies indicate positive outcomes, suggesting that rap music can nurture effectiveness in therapeutic intervention with youth, particularly ‘at risk’ youth. (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003; Gann, 2010; Lightstone, 2012; Tyson, 2002; Travis, 2013). Moreover, the literature generally reports that relative to traditional intervention, Hip Hop therapy has tended to result in enhanced engagement and greater satisfaction among participants (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Tyson, 2002).

Researchers have conceptualized several variations of therapeutic interventions using rap music, however the variations are similar in that the overall goal is to incorporate Hip Hop into therapy. Accordingly, the variations utilize Hip Hop music to engage youth and use the genre as a tool to evoke emotion and facilitate dialogue (Elligan, 2000; Tyson, 2003). Variations in Hip Hop therapeutic approaches may have emerged because they have been conceptualized from different clinical settings. For instance, Hip Hop has been incorporated into different helping disciplines: music therapy (Lightstone, 2012; Solli, 2014), social work (Leafloor, 2012; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002), psychology (Elligan, 2000; Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012) and

psychiatry (Sule & Inkster, 2014). As such, therapeutic approaches incorporating Hip Hop draws upon several different theoretical and therapeutic frameworks, largely depending on the background of the practitioner and the context of the treatment approach (i.e., individual vs. group therapy). The following section will present an overview of the range of therapeutic notions in this area.

### **Rap therapy.**

Over a decade ago, Elligan (2000) first introduced a form of psychotherapy that he called ‘Rap Therapy’. This process draws on social psychology and learning theory as its theoretical base (Elligan, 2000). Elligan (2000) developed Rap Therapy as a culturally sensitive approach to therapy with young African American males, acknowledging its influence on this population and its potential to be used as a tool for mental health intervention. Decarlo and Hockman (2003) concurred in positing the importance of critically considering dominant cultural influences in the context of group therapy interventions with young people, specifically by drawing on the potential of rap music. Accordingly, rap therapy was developed as a response to the need for culturally sensitive psychotherapeutic approaches for young African American males (Elligan, 2000). Elligan (2000) introduced the process of Rap Therapy through a case example, stating that the application of Rap Therapy occurs in five stages: (a) assessment, (b) alliance, (c) reframing, (d) role play with reinforcement, and (e) action and maintenance. Elligan (2000) noted that, “Unlike other forms of therapy that focus on a particular treatment being clinically indicated for the client, Rap Therapy must be clinically indicated for both the client and the therapist” (p. 30). Elligan (2012) presented rap as a versatile tool that can be used to gain insight; achieve cathartic release; cognitive restructuring; behavioral modification; and eventually, express and give voice to changes clients want to achieve. Despite these benefits, Elligan (2012) noted challenges

utilizing rap in a therapeutic setting, such as lyrical content and therapist unfamiliarity and discomfort with rap.

### **Group rap therapy.**

The model of group therapy intervention using group rap therapy was designed to reach African American males by considering and facilitating the inclusion of the nuances of their own culture (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003). It was argued that rap music simultaneously reflects and helps to shape the worldview of young people. This model of group therapy required participants to analyze lyrics from different genres of rap music, including but not limited to: gangster rap, political/protest rap, positive rap, and spiritual rap.

Historically, group rap therapy was developed as an approach that implements rap music as a cultural conduit for developing prosocial skills among African American urban adolescents (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003). Group rap therapy focuses on interaction between members, with a focus on predetermined items or behaviours that are discussed through analysis or rap songs (e.g. impulse control, anger management, etc.) (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003). Differences are noted in the approach. For instance, group rap therapy, as presented by Decarlo & Hockman (2003), appears more structured in its delivery compared to the model presented by Elligan (2000).

With an interventional aim of developing prosocial skills and behaviours, Decarlo and Hockman (2003) conducted a quantitative evaluation of the efficacy of group rap therapy. Their sample consisted of 21 African American males aged 13 to 19 years. Participants included three distinct groups: individuals who were incarcerated for violent offenses ( $n = 7$ ), individuals who were on probation ( $n = 7$ ), and a control group of high school students with no criminal history ( $n = 7$ ). Using the Rap Therapy Assessment Scale (RTAS), a measurement designed for study with no stated reliability or validity of the scale, the participant groups were examined in three

areas: participant affect, preference of group (rap therapy vs. traditional psychoeducational group therapy), and prosocial skills acquisition. Prosocial skills were defined as, “the ability to initiate and sustain conventional interpersonal relations that are both adaptive and culturally aligned” (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003, p. 48). Participants completed the RTAS following the completion of the six-week group therapy program which consisted of two sessions per week, one session being the traditional psychoeducational group therapy and the other a rap therapy session (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003). In the traditional psychoeducation sessions, the participants would choose either a topic to discuss, or the facilitator would introduce a topic and elicit responses from the group. In the rap therapy sessions, the participants were instructed to pick five of their favourite artists, and during the course of the six-week program participants were asked to select four songs from these artists. These songs were then analyzed by group members for selected composition items (i.e. female gender abuse, anger management, impulse control, reasoning morality, responsibility, and identity) and group members identified the composition items in the song, explaining the principle in the context of the song (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003). Results indicated that rap therapy was preferred (i.e., participants felt relaxed during sessions and looked forward to the next session) regardless of whether participants were in the violent offender, on probation, or control groups of high school students without criminal history (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003).

These results suggested that rap therapy offered resonance for this wide range of adolescents, not just those involved in clinical or correctional systems; both ‘delinquent’ and ‘non-delinquent’ youth were engaged during discussions of female gender abuse, anger management, impulse control, etc. (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003). The authors contended that these results support rap therapy as a, “...tool for advancing prosocial behaviour” (p. 45).

Additionally, results from the posttest revealed that the participants enjoyed rap therapy and believed their peers would prefer rap therapy.

Levy et al. (2017) applied the Hip Hop cypher in a therapeutic group setting for young people, with a focus on urban youth of colour. The authors describe the Hip Hop cypher as a, “highly codified yet unstructured [practice] where youth who identify with hip-hop culture information exchange in the form of raps and dance” (p. 2). The Hip Hop cypher appeared to provide a space for young people to ‘release’ emotions, thoughts, and feelings (Levy et al., 2017). The authors note that the cypher acts outside of, and in spite of barriers to, formal mental health services. The lead author integrated the Hip Hop cypher in his counselling practice in an urban high school. Levy et al. (2017) noted, “In observing the interactions of the youth in cyphers, it became apparent that the cypher itself acted as a community-generated form of group support.” (p. 3).

Aspects considered important to group therapy have historically existed, and continue to exist, in the structure of the Hip Hop cypher (Levy et al., 2017). For instance, Levy et al. (2017) described the Hip Hop cypher as having, “unspoken norms that guide group interactions.” (p.4). These norms are described as follows: (a) participants are situated in a circle, (b) all participants have the opportunity to share, (c) every voice is valued equally, (d) positive feedback is given to participants when they share, and (e) participants support one another equally when needed. The lead author, Levy et al. (2017), observed that it was effective to apply, and expand upon, the norms and rules of the cypher in the counseling group because of the previous experience of the participants with the cypher and thus familiarity with these norms and rules; utilizing the person-in-environment approach, traditionally a central focus of social work practice (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). Increased engagement of group members was observed when the cypher was

introduced in the counselling environment, whereby participants shared their experiences, thoughts, and feelings on a particular topic through rhyme compositions that would be expressed during the cypher. Applying the foundations of the Hip Hop cypher to a therapeutic group environment appears to support a deep sense of connection and engagement among group members and a cathartic experience (Levy et al., 2017).

### **Hip Hop therapy.**

Regarded as the pioneer of Hip Hop therapy (HHT), Edgar Tyson (2002) presented the important notion of Hip Hop as a tool and strength in work with young people that can offer heightened interventional engagement and improved therapeutic experience. Tyson (2002) described HHT as Hip Hop culture, bibliotherapy, and music therapy combined. He offered that the process goals of HHT, as an intervention, are derived directly from bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy involves the analysis of culturally relevant literature by clients in their therapeutic process (Kobin & Tyson, 2006). HHT builds on this approach by using Hip Hop music as the principle source and instrument for engagement and therapeutic gain (Tyson, 2002), and more directly by encouraging participants to examine their life experiences through analyzing rap lyrics (Tillie Allen, 2005; Tyson, 2002). Tyson (2002) did not provide a well-defined connection between HHT and music therapy; according to Viega (2012), the literature has not been clear about the differences, similarities, and connection between HHT and music therapy.

In terms of demonstrated outcomes, Tyson (2002) implemented a quantitative pre/post-test design study with a post-hoc qualitative component to examine the therapeutic qualities of HHT in a residential facility for 'at risk' youth. Deliberate in choosing specific rap songs for study participants to listen to and discuss reactions, thoughts and feelings about the lyrical content, Tyson (2002) explored the extent to which the content of the songs elicited discussion

regarding self-concept, positive racial identity, group identity, and peace and unity. The participants, consisting of  $N = 11$  African-American and Latino youth (4 females and 7 males), were randomly assigned to the experimental or control group. The experimental group ( $N = 5$ ) participated in HHT and the control group ( $N = 6$ ) in the standard agency group curriculum, with outcomes and modality preference examined (Tyson, 2002).

The participants completed pre-and post-tests assessing self-concept and peer relations. Although the results were not statistically significant, Tyson (2002) speculated that the outcome may be attributed to the small sample size, and denoted greater improvements in self-concept and peer relations in the HHT group. Themes emerging from qualitative feedback solicited from participants, indicated the participants receiving the HHT approach felt more respected, enjoyed the HHT-oriented group more than previous treatment groups that did not incorporate this content, and were motivated and eager for this approach to continue at the facility. Tyson's (2002) findings provided preliminary evidence that utilizing clients' interests (rap music) can engage youth; this study offered initial academic support for the thesis that rap music can potentially facilitate a more effective and engaging treatment experience than traditionally designed groups for this population.

Ciardiello (2003) used Hip Hop in a group work approach referred to as 'The Lab' with youth in a residential setting. The program incorporated Tyson's (2002) HHT by listening and discussing rap song lyrics that were relevant to themes and experiences of group members. The participants would attend hour-long sessions where they would read rap song lyrics while listening to the song. Time was then given for the participants to write their reactions in journals after which they would be invited to share their reactions with the larger group. Since rap is a medium through which artists express their views and recount life experiences, it was posited

that youth can often identify with the content (Ciardiello, 2003). They were intentionally provided the opportunity to discuss issues in third person, the rationale being that this may be less threatening to some youth because it does not require that they share sensitive, personal material in unfamiliar contexts (Ciardiello, 2003).

Ciardiello (2003) observed that participating in ‘The Lab’ seemed to reduce the number of times participants went ‘absent without leave’ (AWOL). A retrospective analysis indicated that during the course of the program (nine months), the total number of AWOLs for the participants of ‘The Lab’ decreased from 32 to 9 (Ciardiello, 2003).

### **Hip Hop psychology.**

Roychoudhury and Gardner (2012) presented a framework for the practice of what they referred to as Hip Hop Psychology (HHP). HHP differs from rap therapy and HHT in that it is presented as a philosophical framework rather than a concrete therapeutic intervention. Similar to previously mentioned approaches such as Rap Therapy and HHT, HHP is presented as an expressive approach to psychotherapy and medicine, which offers an alternative to traditional therapies (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012).

Roychoudhury and Gardner (2012) contended that traditional therapies are limited in their ability to work with young people. Their approach was conveyed as an attempt to provide youth with an intervention that relates to their daily lives. The authors developed HHP as a framework that represents the principles and tenets of Hip Hop in a therapeutic context that attempts to, “create a new, contextual interaction in therapy that reflects the hip-hop experience.” (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012, p. 237). These principle tenets located how the defining elements of Hip Hop would be integrated into a therapeutic setting with a client. One example consisted of engaging in a call-and-response manner of reflecting (i.e., a communication

technique often used in Hip Hop where the audience is responding to the principle artist's statement). The authors argued that a key focus of this therapeutic approach is to connect the individual with the community, which is rooted in the fabric of Hip Hop as the genre emerged as a way to connect marginalized individuals to the community (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012).

Considering Rap Therapy, HHT, and Hip Hop psychology as a group, it is apparent that the approaches are diverse enough to be offered exclusively, yet there appears to be flexibility in the delivery of the approaches where practitioners can combine methods not solely connected to Hip Hop. The literature provides examples of intersecting activities within HHT such as journal writing (Ciardiello, 2003), while still appearing to retain the overall tenets of the approach. An important strength of Hip Hop seems to be its popularity and consequently its ability to engage youth. Beyond listening and enjoying music, we need to consider the potentially therapeutic and unique role of Hip Hop lyric composition.

### **Lyric Composition in Therapeutic Settings**

Songwriting has been used in and outside of therapeutic settings as a medium of emotional expression. For young people, it is theorized that rap music can be an outlet to express pain, anger, and reactions to oppression, but also to express joy, values, and hopes for the future (Ieradi & Jenkins, 2012). McFerran (2012) presented the notion of creating original music with clients as a way to move the "therapeutic encounter beyond the directly familiar world of music listening and into new domains" (p. 174).

O'Brien (2012) presented an example of the diversity of rap as a medium and its ability to span the demographics of age and experience through the Guided Original Lyrics and Music (GOLM) approach with adult female cancer patients. The GOLM approach aims to engage clients in creating an original song with the therapist as a guide during the process (O'Brien,

2012). The ‘attitude’ that is often associated with rap music allows for and/or encourages a boldness that fits particularly well when delivering a political or message of social justice (O’Brien, 2012). Seemingly ideal for providing maximum impact of the client’s personal message, the genre reportedly is at times successful in elevating the patient’s voice in regard to changing the course of medical treatment and trajectory (O’Brien, 2012). This suggests that Hip Hop song composition encourages self-reflection and advocacy, presenting a language and approach that are effective in identifying and forthrightly expressing perspectives and inner needs.

In a single case study addressing rap, a participant was identified as a mental health patient who personalized the patient identity (Solli, 2014). However, music and rap became an important medium for this individual to think about himself differently and to present himself to others accordingly (Solli, 2014). Solli proposed that rap music supported the individual to become aware of his positive qualities, including creativity and intelligence, and created a space where the client could perform and experience self-confidence and pride. Thus, the author suggested that engaging in rap music composition afforded the client agency and wellness, which could be adapted as a tool to counter his illness-dominated identity and the difficulties associated with mental illness (Solli, 2014).

The composition of Hip Hop lyrics does not rely on music or lyrical length to convey meaning but rather the author uses complicated wordplay and rhyme patterns to express ideas, meanings, and stories through few words (Caswell, 2016; Lightstone, 2012). Some authors have theorized that rap song composition is a catalyst for many different layers of meaning making, processing life experiences and moving toward a better life (Lightstone, 2012; McFerran, 2012). Composing rap allows for the expression of identity (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012; McFerran,

2012), and often reveals various identities (Lightstone, 2012). It was reported that music therapists convey that the process of composing these lyrics offers participants feelings of possessing personal skills and self-worth (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012).

The content of songs written by adolescents reportedly often focuses on developmental issues rather than the ‘presenting clinical issue’ that requires therapeutic intervention (McFerran, 2012). For example, dominant themes that were revealed from a lyrical analysis done on songs written by adolescent girls with disordered eating included, “relationship dynamics, identity formation, and aspirations for the future” (McFerran, 2012, p. 176). In other words, the young women did not compose lyrics that heavily focused on disordered eating despite this being the perceived presenting clinical issue that led them to the therapeutic intervention. It thus appears that song composition offered targeted expression of what really mattered to the individual rather than on what was determined by others i.e., health care providers, as the targeted area of concern.

Ahmadi and Oosthuizen (2012) presented a case study of a music therapy group in South Africa where each of the young male participants composed their own rap song. The authors noted that although occasionally playing a well-known rap song to encourage discussion, participants were eager to tell their own stories by creating rap songs. The participants became artists, conveying their stories as, “valuable, aesthetic, musical products...” (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012, p. 198). Expression of identity was also an important byproduct of composing rap songs, as exemplified by a participant, who chose to compose his rap in his own language, thereby expressing his cultural identity (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012).

McFerran (2012) noted that the participants in her music therapy group generally did not respond to attempts to extend the lyrical content of their songs into conversation. She discussed the ability of the individuals to express themselves through rap in contrast to conversation. This

located rap music as a resource that affords participants with increased possibilities for conveying agency, by allowing the participant to assume new roles such as artist (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012) or narrator (Solli, 2014). The performance of rap was purported to provide a communicative conduit and an amplified voice for participants to share their stories and for others to hear them (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012).

Lightstone (2012) was interested in exploring whether rap music that was composed by youth who attended an inner-city shelter, had personal meaning and if there was any therapeutic value in this expression of meaning. The study examined whether the Hip Hop “aesthetic” can impact the therapeutic process with youth (Lightstone, 2012). Through lyrical analysis, Lightstone (2012) sought to gain greater understanding about “the meaning of the lyrical expression of youth participating in Hip Hop music therapy.” (p. 213). He found that when youth engaged in composing rap lyrics they could emerge as a critical commentator or theorist (Lightstone, 2012), critiquing and deconstructing the social institutions that contribute to and maintain oppressive conditions.

To date, research has focused on music listening, with very few studies focusing on the composition of original Hip Hop lyrics from the perspective of an adolescent. Within these few studies, research has generally focused on lyrical analysis by the researcher or case studies of music therapists’ experiences of conducting groups or individual sessions. The extant literature on the impact of Hip Hop lyric composition therefore is limited, as outlined below.

### **Impact of Rap Song Composition**

Researchers have increasingly indicated that the process of creating rap music has been an outlet for expressing difficult emotions such as anger (Lightstone, 2012). Ahmadi and Oosthuizen (2012) contended that encouraging young people who are ‘at risk’ to express violent

feelings through rap music, offered a beneficial way of coping which avails young people an alternative to more harmful ways of expressing these feelings (e.g., physical violence).

Lightstone (2004) exemplified this benefit by demonstrating that rap lyric composition allowed the participants in his study, “to experience a sense of empowerment through the critique of oppressive social structures, experience a sense of mastery in the context of familiar musical vernaculars, and possibly strengthen their ego through adoption of expression of African American oral traditions such as signifyin’ and boasting.” (p. 105). Accordingly, participants expressed ideas, emotions, and trauma through Hip Hop lyric composition (Lightstone, 2012).

Using a grounded theory approach in this study, Lightstone (2012) found authenticity and emotional expression in the Hip Hop lyric composition. He identified and amplified the concept of authenticity, or *keepin’ it real* as important in rap songs and Hip Hop culture (Lightstone, 2012). This notion of ‘realness’ when expressing oneself in rap music reportedly emerged through reflecting lived experiences and thoughts, which in turn was described to be of great importance within this context (Lightstone, 2012). Moreover, emergent categories identified emotional expression as central to all other categories of expression in rap music composition (Lightstone, 2012).

### **Hip Hop therapy and narrative therapy.**

It may be helpful to draw a parallel here between rap music composition and narrative therapy literature, specifically in the context of the previously presented literature relative to pathology-based therapeutic approaches with youth. The literature implies that the opportunity to compose rap lyrics in a therapeutic environment provides a forum for storytelling through articulating and sharing the hopes and aspirations of participants (McFerran, 2012). Through analysis of lyrics, researchers have contended that hopes, dreams, and emotions are present in the

songwriting of adolescents who have experienced trauma, or are deemed to be ‘at risk’ (Viega, 2013). The lyrics can communicate the “importance of the connectedness to the future” (McFerran, 2012, p. 181), reveal and reflect on important relationships in the lives of the youth, process past events in daily life (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012) and identity formation (McFerran, 2012). In this way, composing rap music could contribute to what narrative therapy refers to as ‘preferred storyline development’. Through ‘subordinate storyline development’, a rich description of adolescents’ responses to trauma emerges, reflecting their already held knowledge and skills (White, 2005). White (2005) described subordinate storyline development as a strategy to counteract pathology-based stories about individuals by attempting to reveal their values, beliefs, personal integrities, and what individuals intend for their life.

Composing rap music and participating in Hip Hop culture have been viewed as a way of developing and demonstrating agency. When young people endeavor to compose rap lyrics, they may be afforded the opportunity to act as an advocate for themselves and other young people whose voices often go unheard (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012). White (2005) argued that it is critically important to restore and/or develop a sense of personal agency in work with youth who are ‘at risk’. It is believed that restoring and/or developing a sense of personal agency will challenge alternative, highly deficit-based conclusions, such as the youth being ‘damaged’ or ‘messed up’ because of their experiences (Ncube, 2010; White, 2005; Yuen, 2007; 2009). Where previously the story had ‘lived the child’, recognizing youth as active agents and the privileged authors of their own stories (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Ncube, 2010; Ungar, 2001; Yuen, 2007), the young persons begin to make meaning and interpretations of their own lives.

Stephens and Wright (2000) argued rap music contains narratives of resistance that challenge taken-for-granted norms and the ideologies that support dominant discourses.

Alternative narratives can be derived and articulated, as illustrated by McFerran (2012) who referred to a rap artist: “He uses all of his songs to outline the life he wants, not the life he is actually living” (p. 185). Rap music seemingly has the potential to assist in meaning making and the internal critical narrative of adolescents who have had adverse life experiences. Rap can involve exposing ‘values’ and ‘truths’ (Stephens & Wright, 2000), as well as youths’ preferred ways of being. While the complementarity of Hip Hop and narrative therapy are posited, there is a dearth of literature to date that has specifically linked these approaches; to the best of the author’s knowledge, there has only been three published articles, by the same authors, that exclusively address Hip Hop within the practice of narrative therapy (Heath & Arroyo, 2014; Heath & Arroyo, 2015a; Heath & Arroyo, 2015b). Accordingly, further research in these areas of therapeutic development and their application with youth are warranted.

## **Conclusion**

The literature to date speaks to the potential benefit of Hip Hop in promoting the well-being of youth deemed ‘at risk’. The literature largely draws from practitioners who have incorporated Hip Hop in their therapeutic approach, with a large proportion of the studies offering empirical evidence for rap music as a therapeutic tool. Yet we know little about process-related elements such as the mechanisms that potentially lead to or impede beneficial impact. The extant literature has presented methods of delivery of Hip Hop therapeutic interventions (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012), including analysis of lyrics that can be included in therapeutic models (Kobin & Tyson, 2006) and case illustrations or studies to convey the potential efficacy of these therapeutic interventions (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Solli, 2014). Few studies have attempted to measure outcomes for participants who have engaged in Hip Hop therapeutic interventions (Decarlo & Hockman, 2003; Olson-McBride & Page, 2012; Gann, 2010; Tyson,

2002). Additionally, there are limited reliable and valid scales and measures to determine outcomes of Hip Hop in therapeutic environments (Travis & Bowman, 2011; Tyson, 2006). It appears that the development of rigorous assessment tools is ongoing, yet there remains a need for tool development relative to evaluating interventions. Further outcome and process-based study seems warranted, in advancing this important and emerging area of Hip Hop as a proactive resource for youth deemed 'at risk'.

Music therapists have used rap songwriting in their work with a variety of individuals and in an array of settings, including adult female cancer patients (O'Brien, 2012), adolescent groups addressing loss and grief (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012; McFerran, 2012), youth who attend drop-in shelters (Lightstone, 2012), youth who are in short-term juvenile detention facilities (Ierardi & Jenkins, 2012), and individuals receiving mental health services as in-patients (Solli, 2014). While previous research identifies the composition of original rap lyrics as part of a therapeutic process, this process has not been explored apart from designated therapeutic environments or interventions. For instance, in the case example of an adolescent African American male presented by Elligan (2000), the focus was to examine if cognitive restructuring occurred based on comparing (a) lyrics written prior to treatment with (b) lyrics written during treatment. Gaps remain in the literature regarding the perspectives of youth about their experience of composing Hip Hop music outside of the therapeutic environment. It remains to be seen whether there is a perceived benefit to youth from creating rap songs in a naturalistic context within their daily life.

Previous research has focused on music listening, with very few studies focusing on the composition of original rap lyrics from the perspective of the adolescent. Accordingly, the literature specific to HHT largely focuses on utilizing the music in a receptive fashion (listening

to and analyzing rap lyrics) while literature regarding active techniques (lyric composition) remains relatively unexplored. Further, research has tended to focus on the analysis of lyrics composed by well-known rap artists. What is absent from the literature is the perspective of ‘at risk’ youth regarding their process of composing original rap lyrics. Thus, it seems necessary to conduct research aimed at gaining a greater understanding from youth themselves about the perceived impacts and experiences of composing original Hip Hop lyrics. Such research seemingly would elicit the possible contribution of Hip Hop and in doing so, constructively inform therapy and programming for youth who have been labelled as ‘at risk’.

Since its inception, Hip Hop has been a platform for sociopolitical commentary that challenges grand narratives, a goal shared with the social work profession. While Hip Hop can be easily overlooked as a therapeutic tool because of misconceptions about the genre, it seems it is critical for helping professionals to consider the potential of rap music in therapeutic work with ‘at risk’ youth. As noted in this review, there is increasing evidence that when the language of Hip Hop is incorporated into therapeutic interventions, the approach becomes relevant to youth and as a result, youth may become more engaged relative to therapeutic processes. Individuals are complex, with life experiences that do not fit neatly into universal categories (Combs & Freedman, 2012) and although the medical discourse remains dominant in helping professions, alternative – albeit unconventional – approaches such as HHT, are increasingly being explored in the literature and gaining momentum in practice.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Orientation**

Several theoretical approaches that fall under the broader umbrella of narrative therapy have oriented my thesis in addressing this inquiry. Instructive theoretical approaches have comprised: narrative theory, and poststructuralism. In this chapter I also present an alignment of narrative therapy and Hip Hop. A brief overview of these guiding theoretical approaches are offered below, followed by a section outlining reflexivity in conducting this research.

#### **Narrative Theory**

Narrative theory emerged in the 1980s as a formal approach to therapeutic work with individuals and groups. Narrative therapy was developed by Michael White and David Epston (White & Epston, 1990). Central to narrative therapy is the notion that the stories we tell, and are told about us (or not told about us) (Madigan, 2011), actively construct and shape our sense of self (Combs & Freedman, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). Stories are shaped by power and are powerful; as Madigan states, "...not all stories are told equal." (p. 31). Stories can privilege people, actions, relationships, and experiences, or render them invisible (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Stories are not singular or neutral, rather they are developed in relation to and from broader social, historical, and cultural contexts (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). As such, narratives are inextricably linked to power and knowledge (social, political, etc.) and thus mediated such that, "...some narratives will remain marginalized or muted in a particular social context...while others will be taken up and circulated widely and with enough potency to achieve relative stability and 'master status'" (McKenzie-Mohr, 2014, p. 64). Consequently, individuals are often constrained by these pre-existing 'master narratives' when describing and framing personal experiences (McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). These dominant narratives are deeply embedded in discourse, and are often presented as 'truth' (Brown &

Augusta-Scott, 2007). Dominant stories can be harmful because not only do they construct ‘reality’, but they recruit individuals into ways of thinking or shaping actions that are problem saturated (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Stories give meaning to our lives and relationships, constituting our ‘selves’ (Strega, 2005), thus the narrative therapist is concerned with offering space and flexibility for the telling and retelling of stories, exploration of multiple versions while moving toward a preferred story that honours the experiences and positions of the individual (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Madigan, 2011).

### **Poststructuralism.**

Narrative therapy ideas are based in poststructural philosophy (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Madigan, 2011), thus it seems important to delineate the central tenets of poststructural theory. Poststructuralism emerged as a response to structuralism (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Madigan, 2011), an ontology that remains prevalent within many helping professions (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Structuralism assumes that systems exist and can be understood in their relationship to structures, and that there are discoverable laws that are universal, guide the function of structures, and therefore there are universal categories (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Within structuralism, structures are viewed as definite and ‘real’ (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Structuralist epistemology is concerned with uncovering universal truths (Combs & Freedman, 2012). The application of the structuralist worldview in the helping professions leads to viewing people, “as individual entities with essential, stable characteristics that can be groups and graded according to universally accepted norms” (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1035).

Poststructuralism views people’s lives as complex and multi-layered, and thus rejects essentialist notions that individuals can be reduced to universal categories (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Madigan, 2011). Within poststructural philosophy, context and history are central to

meaning making (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Poststructuralism emphasizes language and its influence on knowledge production and how that subsequently mediates the lives of individuals (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Strega, 2005). The way in which people function within contexts cannot be described by universal truths and do not exist as all-encompassing realities (Combs & Freedman, 2012), but rather there are multiple truths (Strega, 2005). Poststructuralism challenges the foundations of modernity, questioning assumptions about truth, ‘grand narratives’, ‘grand theories’, or ‘totalizing theories’ (Lundy, 2004). Poststructural theory suggests that human identity, truth, meaning, or structure are not fixed (Vodde & Gallant, 2002), but are continually evolving through dialogue and discourses that are shaped by history and by the social context in which individuals participate. Further, poststructuralism is rooted in linguistic theory, contending that truth is not objective or universal because it is constructed through language (Lundy, 2004). Based on this idea, it follows that knowledge is socially constructed, producing stories that are shaped by contexts of power (Lundy, 2004).

### **Foucault’s power/knowledge.**

In the development of narrative therapy, White and Epston drew heavily from the work of Michel Foucault (Madigan, 2011; White & Epston, 1990). Power, as perceived by Foucault, is relational and dispersed throughout the social world rather than concentrated within single individuals (Mullaly, 2010). Foucault argued normalizing truths that are constructed by power, and in turn these ‘truths’ largely influence and regulate how we conduct our lives and relationships (White & Epston, 1990). According to Foucault, power and knowledge are inseparable, to the extent that he preferred these terms to be combined as ‘power/knowledge’ (White & Epston, 1990). The production of knowledge, therefore, is never neutral (Strega, 2005).

Foucault is most often associated with poststructuralist understandings of discourse (Strega, 2005), which is understood as a large framework of, “thought, meaning, and knowledge” (Mullaly, 2010, p. 115). Discourse includes the unwritten rules that govern how language is used and the way ideas and language are framed (Mullaly, 2010). Foucault argued that knowledge is created by discourse, and is context specific in that it relies on the combination of power, language, and institutional practices at a given time to frame ways of thinking (Mullaly, 2010). One dominant discourse tends to emerge at any given time, despite multiple discourses existing (Mullaly, 2010). Mullaly (2010) asserts that the current dominant discourse, “consists of a set of assumptions about the social world that largely reflects the interests of capitalism, patriarchy, and peoples of European descent” (p. 28). Discourse is legitimized and reproduced when adopted by dominant groups in society, thereby representing the interests of that group and subjugating and obscuring alternative discourses (Mullaly, 2010).

### **Narrative Therapy and Hip Hop**

The foundations of narrative therapy and Hip Hop culture align. Narrative therapy aims to connect people who have experienced similar problems in an effort to grow insider knowledge amongst the individuals who contribute and partake of this critical approach (Combs & Freedman, 2012). The coming together of people supports the resistance to ‘silencing’ strategies and thus combats marginalization (Combs & Freedman, 2012). The history of Hip Hop demonstrates a movement that has resisted dominant discourses and oppressive power structures through shared voices that challenge these dominant discourses and position individuals and communities as authors of their own lives. Strega (2005) posits that feminist and critical race theorists suggest that, “...language constructs and constitutes ‘reality’ insofar as we can apprehend, understand, and describe events and experiences only through the words, language,

and discourses that are available to us.” (p. 217). If social workers and other helping professionals are to indeed honour the experiences and positions of individuals, we must strive to critically reflect on our own participation in the constricting of discourses and the possible participation as agents who reinforce dominant discourses, in this case, by potentially not considering or entertaining countervailing approaches or options such as Hip Hop in the context of youth.

Overall, these perspectives locate my positionality related to the examination of HHT for youth deemed ‘at risk’. This inquiry allows for a critical reflection and inquiry in terms of a theoretical and therapeutic examination of an orientation and approach that appears to offer salience and import for this population. Moreover, this approach and inquiry strongly resonates with my value and positionality.

### **Reflexivity**

I am a settler on Turtle Island (Canada) and grew up on the South Shore of Nova Scotia, Canada in a rural, predominately white community. I locate myself as a white, able-bodied, cisgender female. Growing up in rural Nova Scotia I first became acquainted with Hip Hop, in the form of Kriss Kross, when I was about 12 years old. As I entered high school, my peers and I were fortunate to have access to live music shows, however these were typically ‘gigs’ focusing on punk music. The Hip Hop scene was located in Halifax, for the most part, about an hour’s drive from my hometown. While I continued to be a fan of the genre, it was not until I moved to Treaty 6 (Edmonton) that I truly witnessed Hip Hop community.

While I do not identify as an emcee and have limited engagement with composing lyrics, I have respected Hip Hop and been a fan of the genre for many years and perceive music as a significant presence in my life. There are several instances in my life when I first heard a song,

and the song has remained a trigger to my memories of that period in my life. I have tied life moments to songs, the auditory trigger, flooding nostalgia of emotions that I have felt in the past. I always think of how remarkable it is that a song that reaches millions of people can have a personal effect on each individual.

I have been afforded the opportunity of eight years of post-secondary education. I entered post-secondary when I was 18 years old and have two undergraduate degrees and am working on my graduate degree. I have been a practicing social worker for just over eight years. My practice has been in both urban and remote areas in Canada, in frontline work with young people and research based, in non-profit, government, and post-secondary settings. I was first introduced to narrative therapy during my Bachelor of Social Work degree. The principles and theory of narrative have remained my preferred way of practice and inform my approach as I continue in the field. As I embarked on my journey as a social worker I began to notice many of the social work theories and tenets we studied could be found in Hip Hop music, such as social justice, resistance, oppression, feminism, and questioning ontology and epistemology. Hip Hop has challenged me to question how I know what I know, and move toward a clearer understanding of knowing what I do not know.

In 2011, while working in Northern Canada facilitating groups focused on healthy relationships with young people, I experimented with integrating my love of music with session content. One particular group session stands out in my memory. I started the session in a general format (i.e., icebreaker, introductions, formatting guidelines for the day, etc.). We then began our discussion regarding dating relationships. The room was rather quiet at this point! In preparation for the session I had planned to view the video and listen to the song 'Love the Way you Lie' by Eminem featuring Rihanna (a song detailing a relationship with significant violence). I could feel

the energy in the room shift when I proceeded to play the song. The song finished and I began to pose questions to the young people in an attempt to prompt analysis of the song. The room was silent no more. The music was an entry point for a high level of engagement among the group, perhaps accessing communication that otherwise may not have occurred.

When it came time to choose the direction I wanted to take with my thesis I wanted to infuse my learnings from my formal education background with the knowledge and innovation emanating from the culture of Hip Hop. From that context, this inquiry ensued.

## **Chapter 4: Methods**

### **Research design**

To achieve the aims of the study, an interpretive phenomenological approach was implemented. Phenomenologists seek to understand the lived experience of the participants of a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The phenomenological approach is appropriate because the research is focusing on the shared experience of a population, namely, individuals composing original rap lyrics. This method was selected to capture the essence of how individuals experience and process the phenomenon of composing Hip Hop songs, and attempt to expand and provide further depth to existing understandings of the experience (Caelli, 2000).

### **Phenomenology**

This study drew on a phenomenological design to gain a greater understanding, directly from the participants, about the phenomena of creating original compositions of Hip Hop songs. Phenomenology is a research method but also a philosophical approach (Smith et al., 2009). It is concerned with revealing meaning rather than determining a truth or developing a theory (Flood, 2010), primarily focusing on subjective, first-person experiences. Phenomenology offers an approach to research that considers the nuanced lived experiences of individuals as well as their meanings, and the interactions between individuals, others, and the environment (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The phenomenological approach views the discovery of knowledge as attained by, “sharing common meaning of mutual history, culture and language of the world.” (Flood, 2010, p. 7). Moules (2002) provides a description to the approach she has taken to phenomenology as “...always full of people, territory, history, and of myself.” (p. 2).

While there are several perspectives within phenomenology, researchers commonly use one of two approaches: (a) descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology or, (b) interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). While the two approaches share core aspects of phenomenology, there are also identified differences between them (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology.**

Edmund Husserl was the first to argue that human experience should be examined “in the way it occurs, and in its own terms” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). He is often credited with the development of phenomenology, and what became known as descriptive phenomenology (Groenewald, 2004; Lavery, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). Husserl was concerned with an approach that would allow an individual to arrive at an accurate understanding of their experience of a phenomenon, eventually identifying the, “essential qualities of that experience” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 12). Reflection was of utmost importance for Husserl in that he viewed the act of reflecting as a path to accurate understanding of an experience (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive phenomenology contends that our way of being in the world generally does not involve a deliberate and careful reflection of how we are experiencing the world (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl’s approach to phenomenological inquiry focuses on an individual’s experience and their perception of the experience – that there is a consciousness always connected to an experience (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive phenomenology is concerned with reducing the experience through a process Husserl referred to as ‘bracketing out’ (Smith et al., 2009). The intention of bracketing out is to reveal the universal essence of lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology.**

The development of interpretive phenomenology is credited to Heidegger, a student of Husserl (Groenewald, 2004) and has been developed through the decades by authors such as Gadamar, Ricoeur, and van Manen (Creswell, 2013; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The emphasis of interpretive phenomenology is to provide phenomena in context rather than describing a universal experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The approach to exploring lived experience is where Husserl and Heidegger diverged (Lavery, 2003). In the interpretive phenomenological approach, the assumptions of researchers remain present, co-creating the interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Heidegger introduced and focused on the concept of 'dasein', "the human way of being in the world" (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 174) or, "the mode of being human" (Lavery, 2003). Heidegger recognized individuals as both located within and formed by their worlds (Moules, 2002), thus interpretive phenomenology acknowledges a person's way of being in the world cannot be separated from cultural, social, and historical contexts (Lavery, 2003). The focus of this approach is on, "describing the meanings of the individual's 'dasein' and how these meanings influence the choices they make rather than seeking purely descriptive categories of the real, perceived world in the narratives of the participants" (Flood, 2010, p. 9).

Interpretive phenomenology views consideration of the researcher's context of understanding and personal knowledge as necessary for phenomenological research (Flood, 2010). Understanding an individual within their life world (Moules, 2002), that is, the individual's experience does not occur in isolation from their broader social, cultural, and historical context (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Interpretive phenomenology is not concerned with the objective, and does not seek to remove context from understanding (Moules, 2002); rather,

woven throughout understandings are, “lives, relationships, contexts, and histories.” (Moules, 2002, p. 2).

As an approach within the broader rubric of phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology thus considers an individual’s life context (social, cultural, historical) as central to understanding the experience of the individual her/himself. Particularly salient for the process of advancing social work research to practice, is the emphasis of interpretive phenomenology on the understanding of context; approaching research with this understanding allows structural understandings to emerge and remain at the forefront.

### **Interpretive phenomenological analysis.**

The study has been guided by an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) design, a qualitative approach and derivative of interpretive phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is informed by three key theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2017). The approach draws from both Husserl and Heidegger in that it is concerned with examining experience in the way it occurs, while simultaneously recognizing the role of both the participant and the researcher in the interpretation of the experience (Smith, 2017).

Interpretive phenomenological analysis was originally developed almost two decades ago as a methodology for psychology to examine personal lived experience, but it now extends beyond psychology to a wide range of disciplines in the human, health, and social sciences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2017). Smith (2017) suggests that a primary reason for developing the methodology was to facilitate a way to challenge the pathologization of the transition to motherhood that was typically revealed in research. Researchers using IPA seek to, “know in

detail what the experience for an individual is like, and what sense this particular individual is making of what is happening to them” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3).

### **Rationale for Choice of Methods**

Past qualitative designs have been used to determine the value of Hip Hop music in engaging ‘at risk’ youth in therapeutic environments, and to encourage the self-expression of a population that traditionally has been viewed as difficult to engage (Olsen-Mcbride & Page, 2012). However, limited studies have been designed specifically to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions (Hodge, 2009) of ‘at risk’ youth regarding the potential value and impact of composing Hip Hop lyrics. It thus seemed important to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon; as a result, a qualitative phenomenological design was chosen as the most appropriate methodology to investigate the lives of these ‘at risk’ youth who have composed Hip Hop lyrics.

The phenomenological method in this study consists of inviting participants to reflect on the experience of creating Hip Hop lyrics and its potential impact in terms of process and experience. To that end, interpretive phenomenological analysis, as applied in the context of this study, is concerned with deeply engaging with the reflections offered by participants (Smith et al., 2009). While current research suggests Hip Hop as a beneficial therapeutic tool, as described in Chapter Two, what remains to be explored is how those who compose Hip Hop i.e., ‘emcees’, make sense of their experience of composing original Hip Hop lyrics.

I do not consider it beneficial to attempt to maintain neutrality or objectivity during the research process; as a researcher, I align with the phenomenological question of, and doubt, the possibility of separating myself from my position in the lived world. It is only in acknowledging our pre-understandings that we recognize our interpretations and perceptions as filtered by our

world (Moules, 2002). I am not convinced of the usefulness of ignoring the ‘whole’, as Moules (2002) stated regarding phenomenological inquiry: “I cannot remove my subjectivity from my work, but I can take it up with a sense of responsibility in recognizing how it translates into the way I listen to my participants, what I hear, what stands out to me, and how I interpret it” (p. 12). Further, my focus was to develop an understanding rather than distancing as ‘objective’ what I found (Caelli, 2000).

### **Participants**

Individuals in young adulthood who have composed rap music were recruited for this interpretive phenomenological study. Creswell (2014) recommends that phenomenological research be completed with three to ten participants; this study adhered to that recommendation with a sample of five. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Based on the purpose of the research, individuals selected had composed original rap lyrics. Purposive sampling was used because it allowed for the recruitment of participants who fit the inclusion criteria, as noted above. In so doing, the participants in this study had experienced the phenomenon under study.

#### **Recruitment.**

The sample was recruited from a local Hip Hop knowledge circle, and other youth serving organization located in Edmonton, Alberta. Key informants were informed of the study by the researcher. They were asked to identify individuals (potential participants) who had composed original rap lyrics. The potential participants were then introduced to the study by receiving information from the key informants who were known to the participants. If willing to hear more detail about the study and have their contact information shared with the researcher, the key informant conveyed this contact information to the researcher. Accordingly, the key

informants informed the researcher of interested individuals and a method of contact. The researcher then connected with interested individuals to provide information, determine if there was interest in study participation, and determine if participants met inclusion criteria. Written consent was obtained from individuals who wished to participate. All potential participants were informed that their participation was entirely optional.

### **Sample.**

The sample consisted of five individuals living in an urban context who self-identified as having composed original rap lyrics. They ranged in age from 20 to 32 years of age at the time of the interview. Three of the five participants were female. Each of the participants self-identified as having been deemed ‘at risk’ currently or in the past. All participants were assigned a participant number to ensure anonymity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical review and approval was obtained from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary prior to study commencement. Informed consent was obtained for all components of the study, and a signed copy of the consent form was provided to the participants. Anonymity of participant identify was achieved by the removal of identifying information from the verbatim transcripts of interviews. Electronic versions of the transcripts, with identifying information removed, were kept on a password encoded USB and password protected computer. Copies of the signed informed consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. Participants were offered a \$25.00 honorarium in recognition of their time and expertise.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were completed between May and September, 2015.

Interview questions aimed to elicit participants' experience, feelings, and beliefs (Groenewald, 2004) relative to their composition of Hip Hop lyrics (see interview guide in Appendix A). Semi-structured interviews are the preferred method of data collection for IPA as this approach allows interviews to be flexible so as to capture implicit and explicit details and context (Hodge, 2009). Each interview occurred at either a youth serving organization or a mutually convenient location agreed upon by the researcher and participant. The main purpose of interviewing at these locations was to allow privacy yet consistency with the natural environment, which was expected to invite open dialogue and focus. The interviews were approximately one to one and a half hours in length. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, with informed consent obtained from the participants for audio recording.

### **Memoing**

Memoing was implemented in supporting and augmenting data collection. Memoing consists of the researcher's field notes in, "recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process." (Groenewald, 2004, p. 48). These notes were referenced and dated such that they could be easily correlated with the interview data and analytic decision making points along the course of the research (Groenewald, 2004).

### **Data Analysis**

As noted above, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. I personally transcribed two of the audio files to begin to immerse myself in the data, with the remaining three interviews transcribed by a hired transcriptionist. I extensively reviewed the transcripts relative to the audio recordings to correct any errors and to add meticulous details such as pauses

in speech and emphasis on certain words or phrases. This process required multiple readings and listening of the recorded interviews, and yielded prudent accuracy of transcripts.

Smith et al. (2009) note that a definitive, single method for conducting IPA analysis does not exist; rather, the literature details, “healthy flexibility in matters of analytic development” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79) for working with data. Further, Smith et al., (2009) state, “(t)here is no clear right or wrong way of conducting this sort of analysis...” (p. 80). Rather than a definitive structure to analysis, central to IPA analytical process is the focus and attention on understanding participants’ attempts at making sense of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). However, Smith et al. (2009) present six steps in the IPA method of research analysis; these guidelines provide novice researchers with a manageable approach to data analysis. I used a modified version of the guidelines presented by Smith et al. to inform my approach to analysis. This was determined based on fit with research aims and means presented of interpretive phenomenology data analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Accordingly, analytic steps were as follows. First, I read and re-read each transcript individually to immerse myself in the original data. Secondly, I reviewed each transcript, making exploratory notes in qualitative data analysis and management coding software (QSR International, 2016), related to any content that was poignant relative to the research question and thus of interest. During this stage I focused on making descriptive comments that described, “the content of what the participant has said, the subject of the talk within the transcript” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 84). My comments about the content at a conceptual level included considering the data at an abstract level, i.e., moving beyond the explicit content. Additionally, using a notebook, I made notes of thoughts, observations, and reflections that occurred while I read the individual transcripts (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Coding with the NVivo software, I then

identified preliminary themes across the transcripts by noting interrelationships from the exploratory notes and transcript extracts, and I compiled these extracts to make files of ‘clusters’ or concepts (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). From this work, themes were reviewed relative to the data and themes were confirmed relative to their cogence and discrete elements that depicted the phenomenon under study. I then compiled the themes into a description of the shared experiences of the phenomenon, with quotations chosen to best capture the essence of the experience (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), with the aim of providing a better understanding of the experience of the participants (Creswell, 2013). In the next chapter, emergent themes are presented.

Of note, a portion of the data was also independently reviewed by my supervisor and with a research colleague and consensus was achieved in analytic coding. During this process, my supervisor offered notes on what he thought was important or interesting in the data. Smith et al. (2009) contend that this type of feedback is appropriate for beginning researchers such as myself, as I am in the apprenticeship phase and my supervisor offered a view that helped me to, “see good practice in action and...develop [my] own skills” (p. 184). I conducted peer debriefing and a presentation to an audience that included Hip Hop artists and colleagues in the field. The individuals expressed resonance with the findings. In the results chapter, I have sought to ensure referential adequacy to illustrate emergent themes – importantly I have sought to honour participants through this work, including their generosity in sharing their experiences and insights. This is reflective of my commitment to standards of authenticity and sacredness of relationship in qualitative research (Lincoln, 1995).

## **Rigour**

Traditional positivist notions of validity and reliability that are used to assess quantitative research have been recognized as challenging to apply to interpretive, qualitative research (Lincoln, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1983; Smith et al., 2009). In recognition of these challenges, Lucy Yardley's four general guidelines for assessing qualitative research were presented by Smith et al. (2009): (i) *sensitivity to context*, (ii) *commitment and rigor*, (iii) *transparency and coherence*, and (iv) *impact and importance*. I have adhered to these principles in this study. Sensitivity was established by connecting with and developing rapport with key informants in order to recruit a purposive sample. I also demonstrated sensitivity to context during data collection. As a beginning researcher, prior to commencing interviews I sought feedback and additional resources from my supervisor and a research colleague regarding effective qualitative interviewing skills. In doing so, my awareness of, and ability to conduct a good qualitative interview was increased (2009). Conducting a good interview also demonstrates commitment and rigor (2009). I sought to display empathy during the interview and was also sensitive to putting the participant at ease, one way in which I achieved this was conveying openness to meeting the participant at a location that was comfortable and easily accessible to the participant. Finally, the substantial verbatim extracts from all of the participants I present in the next chapter reveals my sensitivity to the data, "...thus giving participants a voice in the study..." (2009, p. 180). Supporting the themes by a number of extracts from participant interviews demonstrates commitment and rigor as well.

I achieved commitment by the attentiveness I displayed to the participants during the interview. As stated above, I showed empathy during the interview, as well I focused closely on what the participant was conveying and how they were conveying their thoughts and experiences, as Smith et al. (2009) stated, "One needs to be careful to keep the balance between closeness and separateness, to be consistent in one's probing, picking up on important cues from

the participant and digging deeper” (p. 181). During the interviews, I paid close attention to the body language of the participant, listened for intonations, and followed the lead of the participant (i.e., if they made a small joke I would reciprocate by engaging in that communicative banter). Further, I listened for areas where I could probe the participant in an attempt to elicit deeper explanations of concepts or thoughts. Following each interview, I recorded my reflection the interview in an effort to identify the skills I used and the skills I would like to strengthen during the next interview (Smith et al., 2009).

Rigour was demonstrated in this thesis by the appropriateness of the sample. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to match the research question: “How do ‘at risk’ youth experience the process of composing original Hip Hop lyrics?” Moreover, I demonstrated commitment and rigour by thorough engagement and analysis with the data during my analysis. In Chapter 5 I have provided sufficient interpretation of my analysis, “...moving beyond a simple description of what is there to an interpretation of what it means” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181).

I have achieved the third broad principle of transparency and coherence by providing an explanation of my stages of research (Smith et al., 2009). Several people have read drafts of my thesis, including myself, my supervisor, and a family member, in an effort to increase the coherency of the document. Additionally, I have drafted and re-drafted all chapters of this thesis, with input from my supervisor, over the course of two years.

Smith et al. (2009) describe the final broad principle impact and importance as, “...a test of [the study’s] real validity...” (p. 183). This study addresses a gap in the literature by offering insight into the experience of composing original Hip Hop lyrics among young people who have been labelled as ‘at risk’. The phenomenological approach to the study acknowledges the voices

of young people who have been marginalized, emphasizing their experience which is so often silenced. The results from this study invite clinical social workers and other helping professionals to reflect on current practices and consider the potential value of Hip Hop lyric composition their therapeutic work with young people. This study also offers potential for narrative therapists specifically as it identifies the application of Hip Hop in this approach to therapy, an under examined area in the literature. This final principle is yet to be fully achieved as I prepare for broader dissemination of my thesis. The impact and importance of the study, "...lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183). Preliminary feedback from my supervisor indicates that I am reaching this objective.

## Chapter 5: Findings

In this chapter, key themes that emerged from data analysis are presented. It is recognized that the analysis of interview data is only one interpretation of many possibilities, thus the following chapter highlights the author's interpretation. These themes were as follows: (a) Hip Hop as a constant in one's life, (b) descriptions of the composing process, (c) Hip Hop song composition is therapeutic, (d) Hip Hop supports expression, (e) Remixing the story: constructing and living the story we tell of ourselves, (f) Acts of resistance, and (g) Engaging the audience. Text quotes illustrating each theme are offered, as are rich description in order to offer understanding and context related to each theme.

### **Hip Hop as a Constant in One's Life**

The participants conveyed that Hip Hop had been a constant presence throughout much of their lives. Hip Hop often had been introduced to them at a young age by family members or close friends. The participants gravitated toward this music because they perceived it as aligning with their values and beliefs, and/or reflecting their life experiences. Participant 3, as an example, described Hip Hop as an entity that has been with her throughout her life: "Hip Hop has been with me for like a long time now..." Similarly, Participants 2 and 4 spoke of Hip Hop as being present in their lives while growing up. Participant 2 described early exposure to funk music through his father's affinity to this music, which ultimately led to this individual meeting local Hip Hop deejays and emcees and reaching a new realization, as he stated:

P2: ...Like I didn't realize I was really living in the culture until probably the last five years, like really meeting guys like [name of local deejay] and [name of local emcee] who are from...they were kids when my dad was deejaying essentially. So they had to fill that gap in where I'm like 'Oh, so I've been doing this my entire life'...

Participant 4 described being introduced to Hip Hop through multiple family members:

P4: I grew up with Hip Hop in my life, just cousins, aunties, and uncles, listening to you know, old school Hip Hop, like you know, the 90's era stuff, and um...I was just always, would gravitate towards that type of music, you know, and nothing really...I didn't really like any other music but Hip Hop...

The notion of gravitating toward the music suggests a deep connection. When I reflect on the meaning of the word 'gravitate' as used by the above participant, it seems to reflect a force that attracts or draws in the individual. Consistently, Hip Hop was described as an entity that deeply resonated with participants, existing as a significant aspect of their history and current culture/context. Hip Hop was described as a constant, a solace, and a confidant; at times, it was described in a such a way that it became personified, as illustrated by Participant 5: "... 'cause I know in my hardest times like I didn't have no one, and I had fuck all - but I had music." And by Participant 4 who stated that, "[Hip Hop] took me in." One reason for these deep connections were participants' conviction that Hip Hop, unlike other musical genres, represented and reflected elements of their life experience, as expressed by Participant 5:

P5: Well I mean it's different because it comes from...Hip Hop comes from the street...

I: Okay.

P5: I come from the street, like a lot of shit that I've heard of in like Hip Hop, like old school Hip Hop ...I think I relate to. I...like I, like my day-to-day life is just like these songs sometimes you know, and just like the heart, the rhythm, the beat, like there's nothing like it, like I don't fuckin' ...I don't like the sound of country music, it annoys me and I don't like the sound of old fucked up techno music, like I don't fuckin' like that shit, you know...

I: Yeah...

P5: ...and just like listening to my music, so Hip Hop, would be the only, like yeah, I think it's like the only option for me. There's...I never really seen no other option.

Similarly, Participant 4 described Hip Hop as relatable:

P4: ...I could relate to what, to what, say like these rappers are talking about, like Tupac, like back in the day, like Tupac, Nas, Biggie, you know, the greats, um...and I could really just feel what they were saying...

For me (the researcher), what is notable about the above quote is the transcendent nature of Hip Hop. The participant was introduced to the culture by African-American emcees Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G (a.k.a. Biggie), and Nas. Accordingly, Hip Hop is not confined to geographical boundaries, it offers a universal message and a shared experience, and provides a sense of belongingness to a community. As illustrated below, Participant 4 further articulated the broad accessibility of Hip Hop:

P4: ...and you know, growing up, 'cause I grew up poor right, and a lot, a lot of us, I guess as youth at risk, or whatever you want to call it...um...can relate to that, and ah...you know...and ah...I've said this before too, um, like we don't have money to spend on a fancy instrument you know, guitar, piano or something, and the thing that's...we can easily access is...pen, paper, and you know, a beat, and um...even just like listening to a beat in your head and writing lyrics down, um...yeah, a lot of us, you know, that's the thing that's there for us, and then the culture just speaks to us, we relate to that...

The above quote demonstrates Hip Hop as an outlet, and a vehicle for resisting in the sense of facing barriers to access of costly instruments and participating in the creation of music despite these barriers.

### **Descriptions of Composing Process**

There was a range of catalysts behind composing lyrics, yet all participants suggested that their experience of the process as observers and recorders contributed to their eventual role as orators of their personal experience and the world around them. The participants offered a resonant and acute sense of the sounds, sights, feelings, etc. to which they were exposed in their daily contexts and interactions. They conveyed and displayed skills and reflection including being ‘in tune with one’s self’ sufficient to notice their own thoughts and record them. They reflected on their thoughts, presence, or connection, and were mindful of these experiences in capturing them through the written word. Participant 1 described noticing her own thoughts and a process of recognition where if there was content (e.g., a word, an intonation, a hook) that was repeatedly coming to her she would delineate this as significant and document the content. Further, the participant recognized individual growth and applied new knowledge to understand and shape previously documented thoughts/lyrics:

P1: Yeah, if I think of something catchy in my head and notice that I’m like repeating a couple of times I’ll write it down, and sometimes I’ll go back to it a week later, year later and then...

I: Oh...

P1: ... start doing it. A lot of the stuff I’m working on now is stuff that I did, like you know a couple of bars here and there over the months when I wasn’t really rapping...

I: Mmhmm

P1: And now I'm taking it and growing with it...

I: Oh, okay...

P1: ...so it's able to see where I started from but putting the knowledge and structure that I have into it now.

The participants conveyed deeply thoughtful, layered, and complex processes of composing original lyrics. They described a catalyst or inspiration from multiple sources that typically ignited or heightened the composing process. The catalyst could be an event, a feeling, a response to injustice, listening to other Hip Hop artists, or a personal experience either from the present or past. The song also sometimes emerged from identifying a gap within music and acting to address missing content. As an example, Participant 5 stated, "...I don't know... [have you] ever listened to music, you know, [and think to yourself] like I wish there was a song about this..."

Participants revealed a strong commitment to their process of composing a song which involved multiple drafts and movement of lyrics and verses (i. e., a 'cut' and 'paste' process) in a desire to continually improve the song. For many of the participants, the process involved fluidity, yet meticulous, multiple reviews of their writing to explore sounds and meanings that would best merge, as described by Participant 3:

P3: Sometimes, like if it's like...if it like just hits me... 'Ohhh, you know this just sounds so good' and this other song I was working off, so I'll like copy and paste and like post it onto that note, you know like, and like bundle up together because it's like it sounds the same and it's like the same meaning and like it creates...it's like cooking, you add spices and like can switch it up.

Participant 1 also described a fluid process of creating a song, using the analogy of a word map to indicate that there is not necessarily a whole new meaning created from the changes incorporated, but rather branches into many different areas:

P1: No, I mean I start with like a rough draft or...usually one verse, one verse will be, or one hook, even, um, it'll be the starting point of a song, and then I'll work off of it, and I'll start...going from that one hook, so whatever that one emotion was writing that, and building off of it...and then sometimes, like a lot of times, I'll go back like a week later and write another verse, and then I'll write the last verse a couple weeks later, and then when I finish...and it's always to a beat, not necessarily the same beat that I'll use to have it done to [inflection on the 'to'], but it's always done to a beat so I can know that it's on time for whatever I want for that song.

For Participant 4 keeping a 'rhyme book' where he recorded thoughts and ideas was an important part of the creative process. Constantly capturing thoughts and ideas seemed to suggest a recognition among participants that their thoughts related to song composure and potential emergent words, were viewed as important, with an understanding that they would emerge and/or 'resurface' later as pieces developed over time as a whole composition:

P4: Yeah, yeah...like this is not a song, it's just kind of ideas of what I see, and uh...then I'll go back to this later and be like okay, these two bars right here, that, that fits, you know, with what I'm gonna write here, so you know, um, like my old rhyme books, they're just...like random stuff written everywhere, and I would pull, you know, like two bars from here, put it in this song, you know, take this part out, or you know, switch these bars around...

The process of composing a song was not solely about words. For Participant 2, words were typically decided after he was satisfied that he had captured the energy he wished to convey (i.e., vibe, attitude, cadence, sound, etc.), which he recognized was easier to capture by freestyling:

P2: ...I'm really conscious of the difference of when I'm freestyling versus when I write...

I: Yeah

P2: ...and you know, I've been really unhappy with that before, I'm like, 'uh, when I freestyle, this is was better', the energy was way better but I didn't have these lyrics that are meaningful and whatever. So yeah, I'm trying to...trying to make a cross between the two to maintain energy, the vibe, with attitude, and also have lyrics that go along with it.

Although the words could change throughout the process, ensuring the energy captured remained consistent was significant for Participant 2. This participant relied on the energy captured through freestyling, and combined that with written lyrics for a more layered expression that contained multiple access and engagement points for the audience. For this participant and other participants, it was important for various components of the song (e. g., energy, vibe, attitude, and meaningful lyrics) to be incorporated and maintained in the song to evoke these layers of expression.

In another example of this layered approach, Participant 1 described an awareness of content beyond words, acknowledging that words are important but the delivery consists of sound, i.e., intonation. To that end, there was an expressed and demonstrated deliberateness behind the layers. For Participant 5, she described allowing herself to immerse and connect with the music, as illustrating in stating, "Yeah, I'll just make this up and then I'll just start writing, or

like sometimes when I'm listening to beats, I'll hear words." This quote suggests that this participant would allow her mind to freely and evocatively respond to the sounds heard and respond intuitively and accordingly. The notion of 'seeing' music and associating words with beats revealed that sounds could serve as a catalyst for words.

Emotions were also described as a catalyst for writing. Participant 5 stated that it was more natural to engage in the process of writing when emotions were involved; however, she made it clear that the organic feeling of writing with emotion did not reduce the deliberateness of the writing process:

P5: So, I have to be in a certain mood when I'm like writing, like it doesn't...like there is a process and there isn't, like it depends on like... 'cause if I am like upset or something, I'm more natural to write or stuff like that, but I'm not...like I use my emotions to write and stuff like that so it's based on emotions but there's a process...I don't just like write my rants and then put them out.

Similarly, reflective of an ongoing, iterative and emergent process, Participant 4 emphasized that writing was not done in a haste but rather with a significant amount of thought while still genuinely capturing the individual's ways of knowing and experiencing the world:

I: Can you describe what the process is like for you when you are composing your rap songs?

P4: Um, like the process? I think, just beforehand it would become, like it would be more of ah, like a lot of thought, um like I don't really just write, you know? Like someone doesn't...tell me like, yo just write a song, you know, it's kind of more something that, that, say like a month ahead of time before like I write something, um, that'll just be in my mind, you know, just ah, certain, um...I guess...ah...like stuff that's going on in my

life, or around the world, and it just built up over time and it just spills out on the page, and it just comes out that way....um...ah...so like for me, like other artists they'll tell you, 'oh yeh I sit and actually research this', and you know, um, to find the...right thing to say in their lyrics, but when it comes to me, it's just more of...what...what...it's just [what is] going on and affecting me as a person...

### **Analogies of creating Hip Hop.**

Participants offered analogies and metaphors to understand and articulate their experience of the process of composing Hip Hop lyrics. These metaphors reflected and generated rich descriptions of the experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics and the layers that are involved in the process. The analogies offered varied elements or processes including, painting, cooking, and completing a puzzle; however, a theme emerged of multiple pieces and layers being added to the process that come together to create the emergent or evolving product. The process involves creativity and merging ideas to provide the 'picture'.

Participant 1 described the composition of her more meaningful songs using the analogy of a painter doodling versus painting. The analogy offered that with some compositions, there is a deeper focus to building the structure of the song, with the messages and wordplay included:

I: What's the difference between something that's really meaningful and then something that's really fun? Like how would you describe?

P1: Well 'cause I have a lot of political stuff, you know like I said, I keep up on the news and that stuff you know, when I really go into building up the metaphors and building up the structure, it's the difference between when a painter is doodling and when a painter is actually creating a painting.

This participant returned to this analogy of a painter later in the interview to articulate the layers of song composition, specifically related to adding music to the lyrics that have been composed:

P1: Absolutely. I mean the, the beat is just as important, for sure.

I: Why?

P1: The beat is the... [long pause] ...it's like...back to painting, another painting metaphor, it's like when you draw something out in a pencil, and it's beautiful, it's amazing, you could draw the Mona Lisa in a pencil, then when you add that colour, that's what music is, music is that colour.

Similarly, Participant 5 used painting as an analogy to describe the process of composing a rap song, suggesting that there is a perceived link to other forms of artistic expression:

P5: ...it's like painting a picture so the beat you pick paints like the first layer of it and then you have...like 'cause paints just like this.

I: Okay.

P5: Paint is just like... [inaudible]...you have your beat and you lay your like vocal on top of that and you're like...like 'cause when you even start a beat, you like you put down your mixer and you put down your drum kit... [inaudible]...let's say you add some piano and you add some guitars and you feel it so whatever you feel, it always naturally comes out of your music.

Some of the participants provided analogies to articulate the process of merging ideas, such that ideas could be captured in the written word and the individual then began to move pieces to make them 'fit' in the broader context of lyrics, music, beat, etc. Participant 4 used an analogy of a puzzle to depict this process of emergence and creativity:

P4: ...I'll start writing and putting all my ideas together, and you know, piecing it all together, it is like, it's like a puzzle. You, I gotta fit this here, put this here, you know, to make the picture...

In the following text, Participant 3 used the analogy of cooking to describe her creative process. The analogy revealed an emergence yet deliberateness of the individual to 'think outside the box' and challenge the boundaries of her own thoughts, arriving at a point where the emergent product had not been previously envisioned by herself or others:

P3: ...it's like cooking, you add spices and like can switch it up...it's creative...you just gotta think outside the box.

I: Uh-huh, and then that's...so it's kind of like you will take two separate songs?

P3: Yeah, it's like, it's like taking chicken fingers and wrapping it up in bacon...

[laughter]...chicken and pork, who ever thought, it tastes good.

I: ... [laughter]...and what's the final product?

P3: Yeah, done...[laughter]...Now I add some salt and pepper onto it...add some ketchup, keep adding, develop flavour, develop more taste, adds creativity.

### **Hip Hop Song Composition is Therapeutic**

Participants conveyed that composing was therapeutic, reflective of who they are and what was transpiring for them, and cathartic in self-expression. Below are elements that emerged relative to the perceived therapeutic value of Hip Hop.

#### **Release felt through writing.**

There was a universal recognition of participants' engagement with Hip Hop that emerged in their composition. They view composing lyrics as self-healing or therapeutic, with most participants specifically describing Hip Hop lyric composition as personally therapeutic.

There was a sense that writing provided space for an outlet and freedom to express – a tool that was not framed with expectations to say the ‘right’ thing. Those that described this notion experienced it as a physical, cognitive and emotional ‘release’, as though a weight had been lifted off their shoulders, and they had been able to clear the thoughts from their head:

P4: [t]hen I’ll just, it just comes together and it just spills out on the page, um...like, like what we were saying before, you know, Hip Hop is very therapeutic, and, and um...just the sense it gives, not only myself, but other people an outlet um, to, to ah...just express what’s going on, you know, in just my life in general, or what’s going on in my head, you know. It’s really, it really gives me that, that way to ah...I guess...vent, you know? Just let everything out.

As illustrated in the above and other text, Hip Hop offered participants a way to both engage with and release pent up emotions. Participant 1 expressed having a physiological reaction to not writing, and experiencing a sense of relief and release when alternatively putting ‘pen to paper’. The experience of writing served as a foundation that assured participants of balance, providing safety to maintain personal wellness, as illustrated by Participant 1:

P1: ...it became like my world. Like if I didn’t write I felt sick, [laughs] you know...

I: Yeah, yeah...

P1: I could feel it like weighing my soul, like I just felt depressed, and I feel tired, I’d feel like my emotions were all pent up, and then as soon as a I put pen to paper, well phone, fingers to phone [laughs]...

I: Oh, okay right, ‘cause you write on the phone...

P1: Put everything in my little [phone], and uh, soon as I did that like it would all drift away and like, ‘okay I’m all good now’, like I’m not going to go crazy now [laughs]...

### **Hip Hop as sustaining.**

It appears that engagement in lyric composition can offer a coping strategy and a way to be listened to, as Participant 3 illustrated: "...you know like...music it helps me...helps me cope actually, like through experiences and stuff. I love music and just the music process and like to be able to like have other people listen to me is like a big thing." Music appears to provide a platform (e.g., stage, cypher, etc.) to share with a larger audience. The ability to communicate with a larger audience was viewed as a way to be understood and more effective than trying to communicate a message to one person at a time.

The act of emceeing played a significant role in the lives of the participants. Participant 5 emphasized Hip Hop as an outlet, including the significance of finding Hip Hop and becoming an emcee:

P5: ...I wasn't like 'I wanna be a rapper'... [laughter]...

I: No... [laughter]...so did you...did you ever consider that or picture yourself as rapping?

P5: No, but now I couldn't picture without it...

I: Okay.

P5: ...like you know what I mean, like back in the day I couldn't picture it happening, like I wasn't...that wasn't my main motivation but I'm glad that I found it because it saved my life, like having that outlet...

In a reflective moment, Participant 3 compared emceeing to singing and delineated the two forms of expression. It appeared that the experience of composing Hip Hop increased the range of expression whereas singing was perhaps confined to a narrower lens of expressing

happiness. Cumulatively, the engagement in the process of Hip Hop was described akin to medication and a physical release:

P3: The feeling...the feeling, like rapping's more expressive, it's like poetry, as for like singing, it's just like happy, it's happiness...and like Hip Hop it's like my medication. I like Hip Hop [said in soft voice] ... [laughter]...

I: Yeah... [laughter]...I think...and then when you say like this feeling and the medication, can you describe that a little bit more?

P3: As for Hip Hop, as I...I use that as like medication like because it's like more expressive like I could say more into like verses instead of like the song where like you're singing over and over the same lyrics but I like...with Hip Hop you can like use more words, more description and the beat is there and the feeling when you're rapping, it's like, it just comes out and when it comes out it's like you got that like whole new feeling like...you can breathe.

As depicted in the above quote, the act of composing lyrics and then sharing the lyrics by rapping offered a function akin to a generative physical release, where one can 'breathe'. For some participants, there were reportedly substantial benefits to reading their compositions and reflecting on their content, which were linked to healing or reducing the impact of everyday negative experiences:

P3: And I read those lyrics and I'm like in bad mood or like I wanna like get some stuff off of my chest, the way I feel, I can go on the phone just look at my lyrics and it's like put on a beat and it's like read my lyrics and it... like helps me express myself, like you know, it's my medication, like 'okay, I need to read this lyric' is like taking two Advil's...[laughter]...

Participant 1 similarly described composing Hip Hop as a healthy outlet, with the content of the lyrics being described as powerful:

P1: ...I found rap...um...before I used to do like a lot of self-harm, and like actually...um...it made me think of it. I used to do a lot of self-harm, and that was like my stress reliever for me, and I didn't really have another outlet for it, and I had no idea how to take all those pent up, crazy emotions and put them in to somewhere healthy, like I would try to go for a run sometimes, and it'd be okay, but it just wasn't the same. And then when I started writing, I don't ever feel the urge to do that anymore, like I feel like that just, that gives me that safety zone of where I can say whatever I'm feeling. Because this, cutting was always taking a pain I couldn't understand and putting it into a pain I could understand and comprehend, and whereas writing, I can now take my emotions that I don't understand and write all those worries and when I'm done I look at and I'm like, I see these metaphors that were unintended, and it's like the solution to my own problem ...and it's a healthy outlet...and yeah, I haven't done that [self-harm] for awhile.

The above quote poignantly demonstrated that the process of composing lyrics can reveal and express to oneself the meanings behind emotions. Noted as the description of 'unintended metaphors', this element seemed to reflect the freedom offered in writing, documenting, and then being able to reflect, review, and deconstruct for one's self what that is all about for the self and others.

### **Mic Check, One, Two, One, Two: Hip Hop Supports Expression**

Composing Hip Hop lyrics emerged as a form of expression that supported participants in communicating many elements of themselves and elements of their lives, including emotions,

thoughts, and life experiences. The following extract from Participant 3 illustrated such a function of composing original lyrics:

P3: ...you know, like it's on paper, you know, you can look at it instead of thinking about it. You can read it. You can tell somebody instead of talking about it. It's just like a different way to express myself, and that's what I like about Hip Hop, that's what I like about music, like what I like about lyrics...

Central to her description was the act of composing lyrics as an alternative and preferred form of expression “of myself” in comparison to the more commonly accepted form of verbal communication. Further, it seemed important that composing lyrics resulted in the creation of a tangible document or ‘living product’ where she has recorded her thoughts, emotions, etc., thus releasing them from her mind, body, psyche, etc., and accessing these expressions on paper. This offered a means to (and perhaps reduced potential difficulty to) communicate directly.

Participant 3 explained the experience of composing lyrics as taking control of how she would prefer to express herself. This emerged as a conduit for others to more accurately hear what she was feeling, rather than drawing immediate conclusions or erroneous judgements about, or based on, the presentation of her mental health state:

P3: Yeah, it is, lyrics help me cope, it's like expressing how I wanna feel and just saying it... and like it's not like having a conversation with someone like trying... 'cause you know when you like talking to someone say, hard for them, hard to like talk about your feelings and stuff but when you like write down and you like write all on paper and just like say it all at once and that person, they'll be like, 'Whoa, like wow' ...[laughter]...

I: Yeah, yeah...

P3: Like ‘Okay, now I get it, I see what you mean’ instead of like you try to have a conversation with them, they’re like, ‘Yeah, you need help, you should go see [counselling service]’...[laughter]...

The above quote seemed to acknowledge the difficulty and complexity of expressing one’s feelings, verbally and ‘in-the-moment’. This description is also reflective of the experiences of the participant in which she had received negative social responses or reprisals that indicated that she was not expressing herself clearly or ‘appropriately’, and contained messages of imposed ‘wrongness’ to the point of suggesting she ‘needs help’. As a form of correction and resistance, Hip Hop lyric composition allowed space for this participant to resist negative social responses and express herself in a way that alleviated and counter-acted the earlier dismissal of her communication.

Composing lyrics emerged as a ‘positive’ form of expression. As such, participants described lyric composition as an alternative to ways of expression that are harmful to oneself (e.g., drug and alcohol use) in the context of existing as a human being and/or young person, particularly a young person described as ‘at risk’ who often experienced limitations to discover, and have space for, self-expression. Participant 4 described the act of writing and sharing lyrics with others as a means to demonstrate an alternative life. In this sense, Hip Hop appeared to offer and function as a tool and strategy to create alternative outlets for expression, including opportunities for witnessing or conveying forms of expression that countered the limited strategies typically offered to young people:

P4: ...’cause a lot of us, as youth, um...we don’t know how to express ourselves in a positive way, um...That’s why you see people doing drugs, and um...drinking uh...you know, or, or out in, like living the gang life and whatnot, because a lot of these guys don’t

know how to express themselves, you know, in a positive way, and then...so like writing Hip Hop, writing music and lyrics, and then letting other people hear it, hearing you express yourself, it really gives you, that...that...that feeling, you know that feeling, that you don't have to...kind of live that way...

### **Remixing the Story: Constructing and Living the Story We Tell of Ourselves**

Composing Hip Hop emerged as a catalyst for change in oneself, life experience and/or behaviour. Participants were concerned with congruency between the life they were living and the message they were offering when they became engaged in composing Hip Hop lyrics. At times, the message was developed first and subsequently motivated changes in the everyday behaviour of the participant; a process described by Participant 1:

P1: You know that's what music originally did. Before music, I was always hanging out with drug dealers always fighting, always fighting. All the police officers downtown knew me and I didn't care you know, and once I started rapping and I realized what kind of message I wanted my rap to have like I realized I had to live that, not just walk the walk and I got myself out of that...

Participant 5 similarly offered a reflection crediting Hip Hop for shifts in herself:

I: ...without Hip Hop...do you feel like you would be in the same position that you're in today?

P5: No, I don't think so at all because I was so lost without Hip Hop, like I was on the street and it's like 'fuck that', like all the time, like...like I was not the same person, you could not sit down and have a conversation with me like this today. I was not...no, I wouldn't have talked to anybody, like you know what I mean, like I've grown a lot because of Hip Hop, and I've developed like...I know myself, like I'm...like I'm only

[age] and I know myself, you know what I mean, like I know what I like, I know what I don't like, I know...like I'm proud of myself and like who I have become because of Hip Hop, because it's given me a voice of who I am, so you kind of have to know who you are to be able to represent yourself like that.

The act of writing and recording provided participations with opportunity for documentation of themselves and/or their growth. The ability to hear and see the product offered a visual and audible artifact of skills and knowledge, contributing to positive self-perception and motivation:

P1: I think I'll put it like, I take a lot of value from the writing, is what I think a lot of value of myself is too, um like if I write something and I can tell that it's quality and I can see how, or when I record something and I can hear how it sounds, and I can hear growth, like it really builds up my self-esteem and it really pushes me, it's like 'kay I'm heading in the right direction, you know...

Composing lyrics was described by participants as creating space to document the multiple stories occurring across the lifespan. As an example, the act of writing and recording Hip Hop lyrics for Participant 3 provided her with the ability to reflect on and make meaning of her history; lyric composition offered the opportunity to gather stories and define her history, creating a fluid, full(er) narrative:

P3: I started writing rap and I like...I was trying to like write my lyrics...and I don't know, I was trying to be like gangster and all like 'cause that's like the person I was when I started. I was like a ghetto kid, like...practically almost homeless and I was like a big alcoholic and all like I was ghetto gangster and I started rapping and writing and that's how my lyrics sounded and like I kind of grew up. I was like sobering up and stuff,

you know, like the lyrics changed, became more mature, a little bit [laughter]. The more work I put into my lyrics, expressed me more, of a person, like who I am, the stories I'm like trying to tell were like more vivid.

The experience of composing and reviewing lyrics also provided Participant 3 with a source and 'tangible' element that for her and others, both denoted/acknowledged what was/is (noun) and supported self- growth (verb), in the context of documenting and revealing the values of the individual; a personal archive of experiences and actions as captured through song composition:

P3: [sharing lyrics describing experience of an overdose] that was like a dark, dark place, you know, like I was sad when I wrote that and like when I read that, it's like I came a lot to get to where I am right now. Like, I like it 'cause it brings up those memories, like...

I: Because...so that was from before when you weren't sober?

P3: Yeah, it was before I went sober [laughter]

I: Okay, okay, and then reading it?

P3: It helps me cope, it's like...

I: Okay.

P3: Like you know, like in AA it's like one step at a time, you know, like you gotta remember the reasons why you're sober and that's why I like this song, because it helps me remember the first time I overdosed, you know. It helps me remember like, I suffered and all that pain and what I brought onto my friends and my mother and like seeing me like that; it's disgusting, it's whack, you know. Like I don't wanna be that person and where I am is where I wanna be. I'm happy, I'm healthy, I'm sober, I have friends, I got

my family, you know, and they like the new me. I'm clean, I'm sober and I'm overjoyed ...[laughter].

In the above data, Participant 3 contrasted her current and past experience, with an acknowledgement yet rejection of her past experience, and a documented and celebrated shift in moving forward: "I don't wanna be that person" which created a new dominant narrative about being sober and happy, "where I am is where I wanna be." The participant described a process of living this new narrative of living clean and happy. As illustrated here, the story of substance use or other difficulty experiences emerged as not all encompassing within presented narratives associated with compositions, and the writing of lyrics amplified expression to alternative storyline development, revealing what the participant valued which in turn, included family and friends.

#### **Internal views/sense of self.**

Completing a composition of a song rendered feelings of accomplishment and a sense of investing in oneself, including increased confidence, as exemplified by Participant 4:

P4: You know, like I'll finish a verse, or like a full song, or whatever, and then it's like just this overall like 'yeah, I'm done', you know, I'm gonna show people now, and you know, and...I know they're gonna like it, you know, 'cause I like it, you know, and uh...yeah, it just...it just, yeah, it's just a big sense of accomplishment, and just feel positive about it...

Beyond eliciting a sense of accomplishment for participants, composing lyrics and the song as a whole helped to uncover the skills and talents of the participant and expose these skills and talents to a broader audience. In the following excerpt, Participant 1 provides a comparison of her life and views of herself before and after she began composing Hip Hop lyrics:

P1: My life now, I'm a much more confident, happy person. I have something to believe in myself over, something that drives me every day, you know, the days where I'm feeling lazy, like 'kay now I need to get my butt out and go do something [pause] I don't know, I have something to believe in now, before I felt like there was nothing to respect, nothing to be proud of having...

I: Yeah...

P1: ...and I had no real talents, like I was good at things, jack of all trades but master of none, you know...

I: Yeah, yeah...

P1: ...nothing really made me unique and stand out and... now...it's just my whole life has turned around, it's crazy, like I'm such a confident, really back to that confidence, is so huge now, compared to before I had no idea what I was worth.

Similarly, Participant 4 described engagement in Hip Hop as uncovering skills and talents and the acknowledgement of these skills and talents by audiences or witnesses (White, 2006), contributing to resisting the narrative of the 'poor kid', or "negative identity conclusions" (White, 2006, p. 14):

P4: ...I was good at it [composing Hip Hop], you know. It was something, 'cause you know, like a lot, and I speak for a lot of these guys here, you know, um... 'cause a lot of... like a big... not a big part, but like growing up a lot of us are told that we're not...we're not, you know, we're nothing, we're poor, you know. I remember in school, kids are ugly, especially when they're young, and um...you know, and then you start to believe that and whatever, um...and uh...but then you get told, you know, you're good at this, you're really good at this. It's just that, you know, um...we were never told that we

were good at something you know, and then we write rhymes and then uh...I guess let it out to other people and show other people, and they're like, wow, you know, that's good, and just gives you that, I guess uplifting feeling you know, that hey, I'm actually good at something you know, I don't feel like just a poor young kid...

Participant 5 also described her engagement in Hip Hop as a way to challenge past perceptions and behaviours, and a motivating factor that supported individual value and self-worth:

P5: Well, just like I've...the more I got involved with Hip Hop the less I wanted to do drugs, like crazy drugs...and the more I got involved in Hip Hop the more I valued myself...

As illustrated in the above examples, lyric composition offered participants valued discursive tools to challenge dominant narratives about their past which, in turn, offered content to construct new, emerging narratives about who they are and want to become. The experience of engaging in Hip Hop through composing lyrics seemed to resist problematic assumptions for most of the participants; the experience of this activity countered under-estimations of the participants. Accordingly, in the face of feelings of being under-estimated, Hip Hop offered a counter position as a resistance to structures, messages, and discourses that under-estimated and devalued participants; moreover, participants could create and internalize new understandings:

P1: Yeah, I'm just like a product of childhood abuse and kids making fun of me and being broke all the time, that's all I am, that's what I'm always going to be, and now it's like, 'no, that's not what I'm always going to be, and it's not what I am'.

### **Acts of Resistance: 'Each One, Teach One'**

As outlined, Hip Hop offered tools for counter positions, which could be formulated and applied by participants as acts of resistance. This occurred in multiple ways, as delineated below.

### **Advocating for others/knowledge production and dissemination.**

Hip Hop emerged as a catalyst for participants in terms of nurturing change in the self and beyond. All participants further spoke about their desire to advocate for broader change, and writing and engaging in Hip Hop emerged as a medium to amplify their voice for action, particularly relative to issues that they viewed as typically suppressed in everyday communication. The participants described a purpose and responsibility with their music that went beyond individual recognition and accolades. For Participant 2 for instance, Hip Hop was a medium for discussing ideas, issues, and content that are generally controlled and/or suppressed in everyday conversation. There was recognition of larger systems that control content, and are reified in daily interactions, to which Hip Hop was seen as offering a platform for, and means to, question these systems, and as such, critically question and disrupt assumptions and dominant discourses:

P2: There's a lot of stuff like, doesn't get talked about, does [emphasis on 'does'] get talked about but on a very, very surface and controlled level, that I feel like hip hop becomes the wild card kind of even out that playing field.

Creating music was valued as a way to disseminate knowledge about 'how it is to exist' and 'how to exist' in contemporary society, as stated by Participant 5: "...you know, our job [emphasis on job] as an Emcee is to create a narrative for what...our lives are like, what it is like living how I live now...". The unwritten rules, the insider knowledge an individual requires to live in the world, knowledge that has been made inaccessible by dominant groups were offered as areas that could effectively be addressed and critiqued by Hip Hop:

P2: ...So there's an immense value in creating the music I create just because I know I'm passing on something that helped me a lot in figuring things out as far as like existing in

this society within certain boundaries that were there. We may feel like, ‘Oh no, that’s not there’ but they’re there...

I: Yeah.

P2: ...and they don’t sugar coat the fact that they are there in Hip Hop...

Participant 1 described engagement in Hip Hop through lyric composition and emceeing, as a facilitator on the path toward ‘success’, and a desire to advocate for young people:

P1: ...to all the rest of it, you know, now I’ve applied to school and I’m trying to get into [post-secondary] and go and actually stand up for these kids as advocates that are in the system that are struggling, that don’t know how to have a voice, that think that there’s only that lifestyle, and they don’t realize it doesn’t have to be rap, it doesn’t have to be anything, but find your passion and let your passion lead you out of it, and that’s what it really was, like letting that passion straighten me toward that success.

Two of the female participants interviewed were concerned with deeper and deliberate considerations related to gender, female representation, and expectations of gender performance within Hip Hop. The participants recognized a lack of female power and positive female representation in their experience of Hip Hop and appeared to feel a responsibility to address this limitation. For instance, Participant 3 described resisting notions of gender expectations within which a female emcee is expected to ‘fit’ or conform to sexualized roles/images. The participant resisted sexualisation and performing to standards based on the male gaze, and connoted a deliberate commitment to create new understandings and perceptions of female emcees:

P3: ...even now, I’m a girl rapping which is a little easier...takes away attention, like most rappers that are girls, [they] like tend to use sexual lyrics...

I: Okay.

P3: ...because that's how men want to like visualize them rapping, like it's sexy, and it's what they want in the music world, but I don't really see myself rapping like that, you know, like I'm a poet, I'm like trying to reach out with, like the lyrics I say will like...they blow your mind, they're like so out there...

Participant 5 described an aim to promote self-love through her songs, specifically for women. In the following quote, Participant 5 indicated present discourses as an affront to self-love, particularly for women, which make it difficult for young women to feel comfortable with and love themselves. This participant sought to re-author self-love through her writing and in so doing, resist and challenge imposed negative messages and through this work, reach younger women with messages that affirm women such that they do not have to 're-learn' self-love at a later point in life:

P5: And I'm a person...as I'm really secure with myself so that could be really intimidating [chuckling], but like I'm not trying to do that. It's just, I'm trying to get as much women to the point where I am, where you're comfortable with yourself and you love yourself from a young age, not from like an older age where you have to re-learn to love yourself 'cause that's bullshit, you should already love yourself, you should always love yourself...

I: Yeah.

P5: ...no matter what age.

### **Challenging notions of individual deficits and conveying that 'you are not alone'.**

Many of the participants spoke about a desire to create a collective message in their work that would build an alliance with listeners, particularly other young people, and reduce the social isolation often experienced by young people facing multiple marginalizations. The participants

shared their experiences through their lyrics to reach out to others, as Participant 4 stated: "...my message, um...which is kinda, I guess overall, um it would be, more of, um...just you're not alone in this, I guess in this struggle..." Further, the collective message of 'you are not alone' moved beyond a message of support, and represented acknowledgement of broader injustices that reportedly make some individuals feel 'crazy'. Collectivity with others offered strength to resist such imposed messages such as individual deficit and move towards greater recognition of social injustice:

P1: I think my lyrics definitely come from a place of...trauma, and it's always trauma-based, whether it's, you know, personal trauma, childhood trauma, government trauma, like there's so many kinds of injustices that I face that everyone's faced, that I really want to dig into that and...like make sure that people that are in that place know that there's someone there that relates to them, because I know how crazy it gets inside your own head when you feel like nobody else in the world understands and then you listen to that one song...and it's like they get it, they get it, and I'm not alone, and like that feeling of not being alone is so empowering...you know...well actually more so the feeling of being alone is so overwhelming, like you just get so insane and so caught up in your own head that you can do the stupidest things in the world, you know like when you lose people to suicide because of it, or...they've have an addiction because of it, like...but sometimes just [to] know that that one person understands can change a person's life.

Participant 5 described using her personal experience to communicate with young women in particular, to normalize or affirm their feelings and body responses. This participant specifically mentioned young First Nations women who contend with dominant, white

supremacist social, cultural, and political systems. In the following quote, Participant 5 reflects on lyrics to resist the individual pathology of young women:

P5: And people can relate to it, like 'cause it's been there like the fact that they're not alone, like they're not...they don't have to...like I write a lot about mental health and stuff 'cause I have mental health issues too, like I have depression and I have anxiety and I write about like how it feels to have like that and what it feels like to my body 'cause a lot of people...say especially like young women that come from like reserves...they don't know a lot about their body and they don't know what it's like and they don't know what they're going through and they just think they're fuckin' crazy or something, you know what I mean?

I: Uh huh.

P5: Sure...like if you hear that coming from like a person that's making music, like 'whoa, that's a real thing, I feel like that...I feel like that, that's dope 'cause I feel like that and I can relate to that'.

For Participant 2, it was important to suggest a solution to identified problems within his lyrics. In this instance, the participant seemed to not want to leave listeners isolated with a problem, but rather present various ways to address an issue. This notion emerged as powerful in suggesting perceived moral imperatives and impacts of this work, including sharing paths to overcome existing barriers in society:

I: When you say like positive vibe, how would you describe what that is to you?

P2: So, I like there being a...representing a problem, I don't want to just leave a problem there, I like to provide, you know, even if they're just concepts of ways of solving or ways of turning a new leaf over. I like to suggest those things, I don't like to leave with

just, 'here's the problem' and that's that so I like to have a problem and at least the possibility of a solution or at least 'here's the problem, I get that, you're not alone, this problem is not something you're by yourself with'. So yeah, I think like good vibes.

### **Resisting silence.**

Composing Hip Hop emerged as an important medium that supported the participants' efforts for their voice to be heard. Salient within this finding is the reflection of participants that Hip Hop supports 'talking back' (McKenzie-Mohr & LaFrance, 2017) to oppressive structures that work to silence people, particularly young people facing intersecting marginalization. Hip Hop thus was reported to support participants to speak out. Participant 1 illustrated this opportunity in reflecting, "...that's what's pushing me, the future. When people are going to really listen to me." To that end, some of the participants were hopeful and confident that their lyrics would support change, and it was important to perform and share with a larger audience, as shared by Participant 1: "...a lot of my political stuff that's the stuff, I'm like I wanna perform this, I want my voice to be heard, I want people to hear this, I want change..."

Many participants recognized the value of the unique content they were expressing through their lyrics. The process of composing lyrics provided freedom to create something different and innovative. Participant 3 described a desire to provide people with a different view, and spark their interest in something new:

P3: ...like some people like they use the same lyrics and same songs and it sounds the same and you're like give the world a new word and they listen to it...it's like, 'No, this is different, this is new' and that's what I want to try to reach out to, like show the world something else.

Participant 5 explained the purpose of releasing her music was that people could hear what she has to say, indicating that she values autonomous expressions of herself and messages that transcend any economic incentives or potential personal financial gain:

P5: Also like so with my album and everything, I'm just working hard like to just...I don't really care about like money or shit like that, like 'cause I'll have other ways to make money, there's always fuckin' other ways to make money but.

I: And then...

P5: I'm worried about...I just want people to hear it; I just want people to hear what I have to say. I think what I have to say is important.

For some, the medium to which emcees choose to share lyrics (e.g., recorded, shared in a cypher) seemed to matter less than about being heard and someone listening. Participant 3 illustrated her priority for impact as opposed to other potential motivations for recording her music:

P3: ...you know like some people you don't like their emcee voice on the recordings so it's tend to like this...just like go cyphers and just like do it like...

I: Okay.

P3: ...in front of people in the, instead of like...like some people are different, they want to be heard on the radio so yeah they'll record and me I'm just like, I don't really care.

I: Yeah, yeah.

P3: If I'm being recorded and it's like I don't really care, it's like telling people my lyrics like I don't care as long as I'm being heard and someone's listening.

### **Delivery of Content: Messages within Messages**

#### **Inviting, engaging and challenging the audience.**

The participants conveyed an understanding of ‘where the audiences is at’ and the role this understanding has in developing or presenting their lyrical content. As such, composing lyrics was viewed as not created in a vacuum, but rather influenced by multiple contexts. For Participant 2, there was significant consideration of the existing socio-historical connections to the words and concepts included in his lyrics. As an example, he described deliberate effort in his writing to deconstruct and challenge audience connections to words:

P2: ...so talk about colonialism...and the key word... you’ve used [is] the word ‘colonialism’. People have these connections to that word. They’re gonna react to it in a certain way, they’re probably just reusing, recycling their reaction that they had to it in a completely different conversation...umm, and if you just use completely different words to talk about the same thing you’re refreshing their view on, on those things...um, so yeah, the sensitivity [slight emphasis on the word sensitivity] is really where...you know, I figure out how, how coded it’s gonna be...for me anyways.

Participants conveyed understanding that the lived experiences of the audience or the engagement of/with their context will impact their interactions with the music. For instance, Participant 4 considered the audience for whom he performed. He thus he created music for different environments, suggesting a consciousness of social locations and negotiations of performance and engagement that occur within those contexts:

P4: I do have like different, like feels, you know...kinda...say from performing you know, at like a bar setting, I’m gonna have more, not uplifting music, but more like kinda grimy, um, not club, but like, just stuff that people can sit have a drink and like vibe to and be like yeah, that was really cool and really great, but say if I’m doing like a show at, like say like [an organization], cypher, or something um...like Aboriginal Day...I’m not

gonna rap the same stuff I wrote, you know, rap those same songs that I had when I was in the bar setting. But I'm gonna have something more, um...just like I guess, telling a story, um...and...you know I'm just gonna have like different things for different venues, you know.

Many participants acknowledged multiple layers to the lyrical content of their songs. The story or message was described as consistently present and resonant in a given song, yet it was recognized that the audience could interpret the content in different ways. Further, lyrical content was presented to not exist separately from the rhythm or flow of the lyrics. However, some of the participants conveyed that audiences could choose to separate these in composing lyrics. As such, the emcee was noted to have opportunity to deliberately engage audiences via the use of metaphors, word play, or what Participant 2 referred to as 'coding':

P2: ...but to say it that way, there's rhythm there, there's rhymes, there's all the things to focus on...

I: Yeah.

P2: ...if they choose to be...if they choose to be distracted on the flow and the rhythm and the beat, they can do...

I: Yeah.

P2: ...or they can listen intently and decode what's there.

### **Subverted, directed content in composition and lyrical style.**

Participant 1 described the notion of 'hidden meanings' in the lyrics she composes. However, her description seemed to differ from the above extract of Participant 2 in that she conveyed composing lyrics that targeted communicating with certain individuals, rather than a broader message, stating, "I'll write a really meaningful song with a lot of like hidden things that

are meant just for the certain people that are listening to it ...” Embedding messages and codes suggested space in Hip Hop lyrics for targeted messaging and allowed participants/recipients a feeling of safety, derived from the enabling of telling stories on their own terms, by the shrouding or unveiling of specific content in codes/metaphors/wordplay to specific people.

Participant 5 similarly acknowledged the messages are not explicitly revealed; rather, her story is woven throughout the content and if listeners choose to deconstruct the lyrics, a fuller account of her story is revealed. She understood this element as an aspect within Hip Hop, as part of a history of subversive language and acts of counter-cultural messaging:

P5: A lot of my music is like...tells a story too, like it just tells my story, like if you picked apart my lyrics, you'd be able to understand who I am and a lot of personal things about me.

I: Yeah...

P5: A lot of people don't pick that apart but if you did, you would, like you know what I mean...

P5: ...so...but I'm sure that's like most artists right...

I: Uh huh.

P5: ...you just gotta see what's...like it's not just words, ...there's lots of messages in music and there's lots of messages in Hip Hop too.

The above extracts demonstrate the experience of autonomy of choice that is offered within the process of composing Hip Hop lyrics. The individual is free to craft a structure of expression and interpretation of words, phrases, etc. for themselves as well as a broader audience.

**Deliberate strategies to challenge the audience.**

Strategies and techniques for, “dialogical engagement” (Hill Collins & Blige, 164) between the emcee and the audience emerged as an important consideration for some participants when composing Hip Hop lyrics. Participant 2 described being deliberate in avoiding generic or one-sided lyrics, and recognizing how to 'start where people are at' to be effective in his attempt to create dialogue around social, political, historical, etc. issues. He spoke of the importance of understanding audience reactions and creating lyrics that would avoid ‘recycled reactions’, given, as he stated, “... certain words will trigger certain reactions out of people, I don’t want to be an artist that gets a recycled reaction because they heard something [before]...”.

There was a sense that the aim of this work was to compose lyrics in such a way that challenge those in audiences to perceive content differently, and to create space for new ways to speak about issues and exchange in dialogue. Participant 2 described composing lyrics with the aim of creating dialogue, noting that he deliberately does not compare/contrast viewpoints but creates something in parallel, with ‘angles’ or perspectives that intentionally engage dialogue and reciprocal meaning making in strategically seeking to minimize the chance of critical messages being dismissed:

P2: ...but you know even if it’s super ignorant rhetoric, it’s still interesting to know because it’s...to know and understand because it creates...it allows me to create, you know, a double...better angle, more of a ‘bird’s eye view’ when I’m telling it as a story and not just me from my view, but me from my view in...not comparison but in, I guess parallel too, the other views that are around me, to be aware of them ‘cause if you know...if I’m, if I’m, alright, I’m rappin’ about, let’s say Bill C-51, rap about it in the same way people argue about it, losing my res...you’re then hitting that trigger, people

are gonna [think], 'Alright, I've already heard this. I'm not listening to this guy, he's one of those radicals.' But if you're already bringing their argument to the table and then having that more of a dialogue with your view and another's view then that's...now you're being effective in, you know, an education I guess. So yeah, I definitely listen a lot more, try taking a lot more angles and sides of things.

For Participant 2, his perception of how an audience may react to content led him to frame his delivery with angles and what he described as a 'bird's eye view' of an issue. The participant honed his ability to craft lyrics in this way by astutely observing his surroundings, including viewpoints that did not necessarily align with his own beliefs, values, and experiences. The experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics seemed to stimulate the participant to 'listen a lot more' in an effort to increase his knowledge of views that were in 'parallel' to his own. The use of the word 'parallel' rather than 'opposite' or 'contradictory' appears to indicate the participant's desire to approach composition in a way that maximizes engagement in dialogue and critical reception.

### **Summary**

Composing original Hip Hop lyrics is a deeply meaningful and layered experience. The process of composition was described as intricately linked with individuals' past, present, and future as well as their understanding of broader structural influences on their personal lives and communities. This chapter has explored: the deep connection with the Hip Hop culture; participant descriptions of their composing process; Hip Hop perceived as having therapeutic value and supporting expression; emcees constructing and living the story they tell of themselves through lyric composition; acts of resistance embedded within lyric composition; and strategies for audience engagement on the part of the emcee. These findings cumulatively reflect a

cathartic and transformative process of Hip Hop composition. The personal journeys of composers were illuminated in the lyrical and musical content and presentation, as were notions of resistance, action, authenticity, and social justice. In the next chapter, reflections on these findings and implications are offered.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion**

In this thesis, I have sought to explore the subjective experiences of youth who have been labelled as ‘at risk’ regarding the process of composing original Hip Hop lyrics, and have presented an interpretation of their experiences as conveyed in interviews. Findings are rich in depicting an active and important role of lyric composition for youth and young adults deemed ‘at risk’. For the participants, composing Hip Hop was an important and generative part of their life.

These findings illuminate the salience in exploring and understanding Hip Hop composition as therapeutic.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

Previous research exploring the integration of Hip Hop in therapeutic environments has focused on music listening with a dearth of studies focusing on the composition of original Hip Hop lyrics from the perspective of the adolescent or young adult. As revealed in Chapter Two, the literature specific to Hip Hop therapy largely focuses on utilizing the music in a receptive fashion (listening to and analyzing rap lyrics) while literature regarding active techniques (lyric composition) remains limited. Further, research has tended to focus on the analysis of lyrics composed by well-known rap artists. This study adds to the existing literature by offering the perspectives of ‘at risk’ youth regarding this potentially generative process of composing original Hip Hop lyrics.

This study corroborates literature (reviewed in Chapter Two) that argues against the notion that Hip Hop fosters negative behaviour among young people (McFerran, 2012). Some of the participants in the current study referenced the role of composing Hip Hop as a motivator for life and behavior changes. Composing seemed to allow participants to define the message they

wanted to convey and in doing so, encouraged participants to ‘live’ the message they were sharing through their music. In these cases, composing Hip Hop contributed to a shift in how the participants viewed and represented themselves and stimulated or supported positive personal growth. Previous literature has stated that encouraging young people to express feelings through Hip Hop offers ways of coping as an alternative to more harmful ways of expression (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012). Most of the participants in the current study identified the process of composing Hip Hop lyrics as a preferred means of coping, often offering an alternative to harmful ways of coping such as self-harm and drug and alcohol use. In previous literature, Hip Hop was described as a versatile tool that could be used to achieve cathartic release (Elligan, 2012). In my research, themes emerged related to the perceived therapeutic value of composing Hip Hop lyrics that differed from other forms of expression (i.e., singing). Several participants in this study experienced the act of composing lyrics as a physical, cognitive, and emotional ‘release’. Composing Hip Hop became an act of enhancing and sustaining wellness, and in some cases, it was perceived as a ‘life-saving’ outlet. These findings increase the understanding of Hip Hop, and specifically Hip Hop composition, as providing space for young people to release emotions, thoughts, and feelings (Levy et al., 2017).

Existing research contends that Hip Hop is culturally relevant to youth and thus an effective tool to incorporate in therapeutic work with young people (Gann, 2010; Kobin & Tyson, 2006; Travis & Deepak, 2011). The current study supports the notion of Hip Hop as an effective tool in therapeutic work because of the relevance and connection that was described by participants. The participants conveyed a deep connection with Hip Hop music, describing it as an entity that had been with them throughout much of their life, often emerging from close relationships in their lives. The connection to Hip Hop went beyond composing; it was a source

of support for participants and provided a sense of connectedness to a larger purpose, as Viega (2016) stated: "...Hip Hop is not something we simply do, but a way of being in the world in relation to one's self and with each other; it is something that is produced within the world of relationships..." (p. 140).

The current research supports existing literature that contends that creating and listening to music may be a potential vehicle that would support dialogue with clients regarding issues that may be difficult to access during therapeutic encounters (Kobin & Tyson, 2006). Moreover, communicating through original lyrics or analyzing lyrics by well-known Hip Hop artists reportedly can act as a 'breakthrough' between practitioners and young people in therapeutic settings (Blank, 2008). The experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics seemed to offer space for participants to document, gather, and ultimately access stories, life experiences, emotions, thoughts and responses, and potentially reduced the difficulty of expressing these items, particularly by means of the generally accepted forms of communication (i.e., verbal conversations). This thesis research adds to the literature in that it offers further interpretation of the potential benefits in the connection between supporting expression in a therapeutic setting and composing Hip Hop lyrics. Accordingly, the process of composing lyrics emerged as a potential point of resistance to everyday expectations of how communication is expressed and understood, and provided an approachable means to convey complex internal and external experiences. Composing lyrics appears to reduce the restriction of individuals to uni-dimensional accounts of experience, thus reducing the struggles individuals may have in relaying their experiences including the complexities in their lives through a dominant and potentially overly narrow and imposing language and discourse system; thus, Hip Hop composition can be a tool for providing space for more multifaceted and nuanced accounts of the human experience.

Although participants shared differences in the catalysts behind their composing process (e.g., an event, a feeling, etc.), there was consistency found across participants' experiences pertaining to an attentiveness to their thoughts, feelings, and observations of the world around them. Composing emerged as an intimate yet interactive process; there was a willingness to expose thoughts, feelings, and experiences to a broader audience through a nuanced, complex, and layered process of creation.

Participants were astutely aware of their experience in the context of their world, drawing similarities to the phenomenological underpinnings of this thesis. Reflecting on this notion of phenomenological expression, Smith et al. (2009) stated, "The lived experience of being a body-in-the-world can never be entirely captured or absorbed, but equally, must not be ignored or overlooked" (p. 19). The process of composing Hip Hop lyrics for the participants included perception and awareness of their experience, and also consciousness to these experiences, while recognizing the fluidity of these observations. For example, the 'cut and paste' process described by several participants demonstrated recognition of the incompleteness of thoughts. Such findings suggest that the process of composing Hip Hop lyrics requires a component of "reflective dimension" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13) that is also required to engage in phenomenology.

Study findings reveal that the experience of composing original Hip Hop lyrics is not distinct or separate from belonging to the Hip Hop community and identifying with Hip Hop culture. Woven throughout participant descriptions are notions and context that are embedded in the history, sensitivities, and skills of Hip Hop culture. Beyond or within participants experiences of lyric composition, they revealed a deep connection to, and sharing of the values and beliefs of Hip Hop which appeared to reflect the, "...social, relational and cultural genesis" of the

responses to their experience within the Hip Hop culture (White, 2005, p. 13). For instance, coded language and embedded messaging were described by several of the participants. Coded language is not new; as an example, Bailey (2014) wrote, “African slaves in America had to develop entirely new ways of communicating with each other; within the rough framework provided by the English language, they developed a heavily coded language and cultural jargon, a language used to communicate with each other, and to protect each other from reprisals...” (p. 20). Similarly, participants’ approach to composing, as depicted in the current study, appears to be at least somewhat rooted in the African American subversive, counter-cultural discourse from which Hip Hop emerged (Bailey, 2014). Lyrics composed by the participants considered forms and uses/misuses of power, and demonstrated/engaged in complex forms of communication that maintained safety while continuing to expand language and meaning and disrupting everyday discourse through coded language.

Travis and Deepak’s (2011) work is consistent with, and potentially extends, the findings of this study in noting the potential of utilizing Hip Hop in the therapeutic setting as a tool to mobilize, “...broader social change and community wellbeing.” (p. 206). Indeed, social change and justice are consistent with the core tenets of Hip Hop, a goal shared with clinical social work’s pursuit of social justice (McLaughlin, 2011). Revealed by the participants’ descriptions of composing Hip Hop lyrics was a deliberateness to embed social justice and activism within their writing. Participants further viewed and engaged in lyric composition as a vehicle that honoured both their ways of knowing and being in the world that otherwise tended to be suppressed, and as such, they engaged in and contributed to social justice. Revealed by the participants’ descriptions of composing Hip Hop lyrics was a deliberateness to embed activism within their writing; a tenet embedded in Hip Hop as noted by Endsley (2014): “Hip Hop history

is rooted in social activism.” (p. 46). Social justice as it exists within Hip Hop can expand the ability of clinical social workers to mobilize broader social change, supporting, “a multidimensional conceptualization of social justice for clinical social workers...” (McLaughlin, 2011, p. 246).

Related to social and discursive justice aims and actions, the experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics supported the assertion of challenges to the way knowledge is produced and (re)cycled within dominant discourse. Moreover, composing Hip Hop lyrics seemed to be viewed as a way to pass along knowledge produced outside dominant structures. As White and Epston (1990) have noted, “...it has been demonstrated that independent knowledge can exist in a community and be passed on by other means, including through the tradition of story-telling and through the medium of song and dance.” (p. 35). Importantly, the female participants conveyed a focus on advocacy and resistance as it relates to expectations of gender (i.e., sexualisation of female emcees) within some realms of Hip Hop and their everyday experience.

The extant literature on Hip Hop lyric composition suggests that this form of expression could elevate or amplify the voices of individuals in medical and therapeutic settings (Ahmadi & Oosthuizen, 2012; McFerran, 2012; O’Brien, 2012). Further, Hip Hop has been described as a tool illuminating changes that individuals in therapeutic contexts want to achieve (Elligan, 2012). Viega (2016) noted, “[Hip Hop] is an ingrained understanding of what it is to be the other, marginalized, oppressed, and victimized, not only culturally, socially, and politically, but psychologically as well.” (p. 140). The notion of ‘being heard’ that emerged from the participants in the current research is a skill and knowledge that can be traced and linked to the history and culture of Hip Hop (Ncube, 2010).

Hip Hop has historically and consistently been a platform of resistance: "...a humanitarian force giving underprivileged and ignored people, particularly youth and minorities ...seats at the table of public, intercultural discourse" (Bailey, 2014, p. 34). Existing literature on Hip Hop lyric composition indicates that the process of creating Hip Hop lyrics provides space for young people to assume the role of critical commentator, engaging in disrupting and deconstructing oppressive social structures (Lightstone, 2012). Similarly, in this study, composing Hip Hop lyrics emerged as an act of resistance in and of itself in that it resisted notions of what it means to participate in music, and provided new ways of defining artistry and creativity. In engaging the broader community, Hip Hop is accessible and welcoming; young people do not face barriers such as financial resources to purchase instruments. As an example, a participant in this study noted that Hip Hop song composition only requires access to a pen and paper, and a beat.

Beyond engagement and desire for change, there was a sense of increased personal agency derived from the experience of composing lyrics whereby participants reflected on and determined a solution to a pressing issue. This seems consistent with the notion of personal agency for change, as noted by White (2005): "The restoration and/or development of this sense of personal agency provides an antidote to the sort of highly disabling conclusions about one's identity that feature perceptions that one is a passive recipient of life's forces" (p. 14).

In the documentary, *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*, Grandmaster Caz (emcee, DJ, Hip Hop pioneer) stated, "Hip Hop didn't invent anything. Hip Hop reinvented everything" (Toogood & Ice T, 2012). This notion of re-inventing, or 'redescription', is woven throughout Hip Hop history and was revealed in participants' descriptions of their experience. The experience of composing original Hip Hop lyrics seemed to assist participants to ascribe new

meaning to their life narratives, inviting, “a redescription of self” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 17) that was a more complete account of who they were (Madigan, 2011). In the current study, Hip Hop emerged as a conduit for uncovering the skills and talents of the participants, and provided the opportunity to have these skills and talents witnessed and acknowledged by broader audiences, ultimately speaking into existence relevant and accurate representations of one’s self. Composing Hip Hop lyrics offered space for participants to re-author narratives outside of dominant narratives (Madigan, 2011; White, 2007), thereby highlighting and creating visibility for preferred accounts of the individual (Madigan, 2011; McKenzie-Mohr, 2014). This notion of moving to preferred identities and stories through the act of composing Hip Hop lyrics is consistent with literature presented in Chapter Two (McFerran, 2012; Solli, 2014). For instance, in the single case study with an individual with a mental health diagnosis, Solli (2014) suggested that the act of composing Hip Hop lyrics offered the individual knowledge and skills outside of the dominant narrative of the diagnosed mental illness. Composing Hip Hop lyrics thus emerges as a conduit for elevating and amplifying subjugated knowledge (White & Epston, 1990).

For the participants in the current study, composing Hip Hop lyrics appeared to be a mechanism that assisted individuals in archiving and mapping (White and Epston, 1990) life experiences, and served as a rich, provocative mechanism to reflect on and process those life experiences through composed lyrics. The experience of composing lyrics seemingly assisted many of the participants with formulating or reformulating meaning of experiences and moving toward an understanding of who they are (their ‘self’), and how their life has, is, and potentially will unfold (their life). White and Epston (1990) explained the importance of such a process:

In order to perceive change in one’s life – to experience one’s life as progressing – and in order to perceive oneself changing one’s life, a person requires mechanisms that assist her to plot the events of her life within the context of coherent sequences across time – through the past, present and future. (p. 35).

## **Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice**

Beyond the potential for heightened youth engagement in the therapeutic encounter via elements of Hip Hop, the question emerges, ‘why may it be important for social workers to consider Hip Hop in walking alongside clients within social work practice’. It seems important to recognize that clinical social work is not immune to knowledge discourses and the influence of dominant and potentially oppressive elements of clinical practice. Hip Hop demonstrates expression rooted in, “resistance to oppressive conditions and as an alternative to mainstream media” (Benitez Jr., 2015, p. 62). Hip Hop has been a path to healing prior to being identified as such in the academy and formal therapeutic environments; it is an expression that resists structures and narratives that do not accurately or justly reflect individuals and communities (Benitez Jr., 2015). Actively ignoring or excluding Hip Hop is viewed as participating in the marginalization or silencing of alternative perspectives, thereby maintaining dominant ways of knowing or said differently, perpetuating dominant ways of knowing as ‘normative’ or privileged. Parmar, Nocella, Robertson, and Diaz (2015) argued that, “The values of particular forms of knowledge, language, and experience familiar only to certain (privileged) ideologies are legitimized, thereby reproducing what French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu refers to as ‘cultural capital’...” (p. xx). Openness and attentiveness to alternative expression, knowledge, language and experience in the therapeutic encounter emerge as salient and just relative to the social work engagement.

Social workers must challenge approaches that contribute to maintaining oppressive stories. Considering Hip Hop in the therapeutic environment has the potential to enhance the “‘hear-ability’ and ‘tell-ability’ of counter stories” (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017, p. 194), by creating a participatory space. Hip Hop is already a vehicle that encourages the shared hearing

of an individual's narrative. McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2017) contend that stories must be nurtured to thrive; this action can be supported by, "Facilitating the shared hearing and validation of people's narratives of resistance" (p. 200). McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2017) further encourage social workers to consider, "opening up spaces for narratives of resistance..." (p. 196). In doing so, the context offered for the stories must be considered:

- a. What narratives are invited by the physical space (e.g. in the hospital room, the dorm room, the court)? What ways of telling are opened or foreclosed?
- b. How does power circulate in the particular space?
  - (i) What rules, expectations, and roles are at play for various actors within this space?
  - (ii) Who holds the most power to speak and frame experience here?
  - (iii) How can power be differently distributed? (p. 196).

The above considerations offered by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance raise implications for our understanding of Hip Hop and social work. The history of Hip Hop, as well as findings from this research, reveal a method of storytelling that supports the development of counter stories and resistance. Hip Hop supports individuals in using language in ways that perhaps more accurately reflect their experience and in so doing, allow room to envelop the use of metaphors, wordplay, and coding. Further, expressiveness in Hip Hop moves beyond verbal communication only, with the use of beats and music individuals can express emotion and energy. Acknowledging connections between individuals and Hip Hop within therapeutic environments challenges social workers to explore and honour the stories of individuals supported outside of the therapeutic context (Madigan, 2011). The participants in this research had labels and diagnoses ascribed to them, but Hip Hop supported multistoried accounts of their lives (e.g., storytellers, orators of their world conveying important observations to broader audiences, social justice advocates with highly refined skills and knowledge, etc.).

The findings from this study invite social workers and other helping professionals to consider, honour, and create space for the ways in which young people are narrating (or could

narrate) their stories. Of note, the telling of these stories is happening, but we intentionally must hear and nurture the delivery of the content by advancing the, “‘hear-ability’ and ‘tell-ability’” of these stories (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017, p. 203). Hip-Hop can act as a therapeutic tool to reject inadequate discourses and potentially reclaim new or under-recognized ones.

Considering Hip Hop may remind social workers to remove barriers in therapeutic environments that obscure fuller accounts of an individual and the context in which that individual exists.

### **Strengths and limitations of this Study**

#### **Strengths of the study.**

Based on the literature review outlined in this thesis, my understanding is that research had yet to derive ‘first hand’ experiences of composing original Hip Hop lyrics from young emcees themselves. Accordingly, it is hoped that this study has addressed this important gap by offering rich accounts of the experience of composing Hip Hop including how emcees engage in the process. Such descriptions build on existing literature and practice approaches, and offer further understanding about the therapeutic potential of Hip Hop, with clinical implications for social workers and other helping professionals working with young people.

#### **Limitations of the study.**

A limitation of this study reflected sample selection as the sample was generated from only one identified Hip Hop community in Edmonton, Canada. It is possible that the participants’ involvement in the organizations/groups, from which sample recruitment occurred, may have in some way influenced or confounded the experience of composing original rap lyrics. The presence of myself, as a researcher, may have biased the responses of the participants (Creswell, 2014). In collecting data as an outsider to the Hip Hop community, the participants may have limited or censored their responses. Further sample inclusion would be enhanced by

additional areas of other diversity such as neuro-developmental diversity. Given the multi-sensory expression of Hip Hop, its application in various cultures and communities seems promising and salient, yet a broader sample was under-represented in this study.

The study was further limited by the design of a single interview at a ‘moment in time’; further research examining longitudinal impacts for individuals and communities is needed. The extent to which counter narrative composition and expression influence change was not the focus of this study, but emerges as an important area for future research development. Further, this study did not specifically examine Hip Hop lyric composition within the therapeutic encounter. Such interventional research is needed in addressing and potentially advancing this therapeutic genre.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

As noted above, this study invites future research development. Results highlight the need for the examination and development of methods for eliciting the potential benefits of Hip Hop in therapy and programming with young people. Hip Hop has been predominately explored as a treatment modality in settings working with youth who have been labelled ‘at risk’, with only a few exceptions (see O’Brien, 2012; Steele, 2012; Stephens, Braithwaite, & Taylor, 1998). Beyond this population of youth, understanding the therapeutic potential of Hip Hop with other youth populations, such as youth with neurodevelopmental disorders, mental health challenges, transitional challenges, loss and grief issues, etc., remains to be explored.

Further research that focuses on additional subsets of the youth and young adult population and their experience with Hip Hop would elicit increased knowledge regarding the possible contributions of Hip Hop as a treatment or programming modality for young people. Broadening examined outcomes of Hip Hop from an individual focus to community and

population-level change, appears warranted. Considering and evaluating varied applications seems warranted. As an example, the insights of Hip Hop composers may have particular salience when intersected with the teachings of elders in a community, in the aim of redressing issues of oppression. Considering Hip Hop as a means of commentary, a form of expression and a therapeutic device warrants further study in terms of social justice importance and change. Studies are needed that appraise the role and impact of Hip Hop, relative to various social determinants of health barriers. Research with individual as well as communities (including participatory designs) seems important in potentially amplifying experiences and considering generative steps forward for individuals, families, communities and societies, including efforts for potentially reshaping oppressive discourses.

## **Conclusion**

This study offered an account of the experience of composing original Hip Hop lyrics among five young people. Current literature has argued for the benefit of Hip Hop in therapeutic settings and as a mechanism that promotes the wellbeing of young people who have been labelled 'at risk'. This study adds to the literature by amplifying the experience of composing Hip Hop lyrics, from the perspective of young people. The findings offer multiple benefits of music composition within the composers' daily life. This work provides insight to inform clinical social work practice, and broadens our understanding of the potential contribution of Hip Hop in providing therapy and programming to young people. Accordingly, incorporating Hip Hop in the compendium of support resources for youth indeed emerges as a genre worthy of pursuit.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Describe what the process has been like for you when composing original rap lyrics. (Probing questions: For how long have you been composing rap lyrics? When/where do you usually write lyrics? Is it spontaneous? What has that been like for you? What are you thinking? How often do you engage in this process?)
2. Based on your experiences, describe the meaning and/or value of composing rap music for you. (Probing questions: What originally attracted you to composing rap songs? What do you think your songs reflect? What is your focus when you write rap lyrics?<sup>1</sup>)
3. How do you think the experience of composing rap music has impacted you in everyday life/behaviour? (Probing questions: How do you think that composing rap music has helped or hindered you? Was there a time when you did not compose rap music?<sup>2</sup> If so, how were things the same or different for you? What were you like then as opposed to your life now with rap music? Does involvement in composing rap songs help you with life experiences? If so, how? What do you feel like before you write rap songs?<sup>3</sup> How do you feel after?<sup>4</sup>)
4. What, if anything, are you communicating through your rap lyrics? (Probing questions: What do you perceive to be the message of your lyrics? What do you think you are exploring through your music? What does your music say about you?)
5. Can you describe what your final step is in the process, i.e. what do you do with the final product? Do you share or perform your work with others? Do you add music or beats to your lyrics? Is it important to add music? Do your songs change throughout the process? Do new messages/themes emerge?

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<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> I would like to acknowledge Allison R. Anderson's thesis work for these probing questions.

## Appendix B: Informed Consent



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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Amber Young, Masters of Social Work Student  
Faculty of Social Work  
[ayoun@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ayoun@ucalgary.ca)

**Supervisor:**

Dr. David Nicholas, Associate Professor  
Faculty of Social Work

**Title of Project:**

A phenomenological study on the experience of composing rap lyrics among ‘at risk’ youth

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study is being conducted as a partial requirement for the degree of Masters of Social Work. This study wants to gain a greater understanding of the experience of writing original rap lyrics from youth who have been labeled as ‘at risk’.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

I am asking you to talk to me about your experience of composing original rap lyrics.

The individual interview will last about 1 hour. It will take place at a time and place that is mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher. I will ask you questions about your process of composing rap lyrics. I will tape record the interview. Later, I will write out what you said, word for word, but all information about who you are will be removed. If you decide you no longer want to take part in the

study all information I have gathered about you will be destroyed. I would like to contact you at a later date to discuss the results of the interviews. If you would like me to contact you to participate in this discussion please let me know, this participation is completely voluntary.

At the end of the study results may be shared with relevant audiences (local community based agencies serving youth) and through educational opportunities mainly with university students. You are welcome to attend these workshops and presentations.

It is your choice to take part in this study. You can step away at any time by telling the researcher. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to answer. The services you currently receive from youth serving organizations and/or your involvement with groups (i.e. Cipher5) will not be affected in any way if you do or don't take part in this study.

**What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your gender and age.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I wish to remain anonymous: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

I grant permission to be contacted to discuss interview findings: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

**Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

I do not think you will experience any bad things from being in the study. If you are upset at any time during the interview or want further support you can tell the interviewer and additional support will be sought.

I will respect your privacy. No information about you will be given to anyone or be published without your permission, unless required by law.

You may find it helpful to talk about your experiences. Your taking part in the study will help us to better understand the experience of youth who compose rap lyrics. By participating in this study you may learn more about yourself. This information will help to improve the ability of counseling professionals to provide better services to youth.

If you choose to participate in the study and complete the interview you will be provided with a \$25.00 gift card.

**What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Your confidentiality will be protected. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the researcher will take all necessary steps to reduce to chances of confidentiality being violated. All personal

information will be removed from the data and audio recordings will be destroyed after data analysis. The data produced from this study will be stored in a secure, locked location. Only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor will have access to the data. Following completion research study the data will be kept for five years after publication of the study results. While data collection will be aggregate or summarized according to themes, quotes may be included in final reports, articles or other presentations. Individual comments will not identify you and published study results will not reveal your identity.

If at any point during the study you decide you no longer want to take part and you withdraw from the study, all information I have gathered about you will be destroyed, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.

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### ***Signatures***

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Ms. Amber Young  
Faculty of Social Work  
ayoun@ucalgary.ca  
and  
Dr. David Nicholas  
Faculty of Social Work  
(780) 492-8094  
nicholas@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

### **Appendix C: Recruitment Script**

Hello, my name is Amber Young. I am a graduate student at the University of Calgary in the Faculty of Social Work. I am conducting research on original rap lyric composition and I am inviting you to participate because you write your own rap lyrics. In doing this study, I am hoping to greater understanding, directly from youth and young people, of the experience of creating original compositions of rap songs. I am also doing the study to help determine implications for clinical social work practice, and report findings in such a way that professionals working with youth gain a better understanding of the potential role and the contribution that hip hop may or may not have in work with youth who have been labeled as 'at risk'.

Participation in this study involves doing a one-on-one interview with me that will be audio recorded and will focus on you and your experience composing original rap lyrics. The interview will be about 45 minutes to an hour in length and will take place in a location that is agreed upon by you and I.

Feel free to contact me by email ([ayoun@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ayoun@ucalgary.ca)) for more information, or if you're interested in participating in the study. This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

Sincerely,  
Amber Young