

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Indigeneity and Resistance in Hip Hop and Lived Experiences of Youth of African Descent in Canada

**“A legacy of racism towards Black people is embedded within the systemic workings of Canadian institutions associated with White power and privilege. Black youth have to deal with the realities of racism and discrimination on a daily basis. Hip hop culture offers a way of belonging for Black youth precisely because it is a form of resistance against White supremacy and racial discrimination. Black youth of African descent take on hip hop culture as their own and identify with its forms of resistance and struggles of Black people everywhere” (p. 123).**

## 1. What is the research about?

The research explores ways in which youth of African descent in Canada – including migrant and first-generation youth – appropriate rap, the musical style of hip hop, and use it as a tool of resistance as they make sense of their own identities within the context of racism and inequality in a white supremacist state. For artists who go ‘back home’ and make music, performing on Indigenous lands is necessarily a way for African youth to reclaim their identities and histories that bring about spiritual healing, as they imbue new and different meanings on Africa’s colonized lands. Local African artists who have appropriated hip hop in Indigenous languages and pidgins use it as a form of resistance to speak against the vices and injustices in society, and to counter racist images of Africa used by development agencies in the West.

## 2. Where did the research take place?

The research draws on media reviews that shed light on the **experiences of African-Canadian artists**, including:

- Somali-Canadian hip hop artist K’naan, who lived through violent experiences as a child of war in Somalia and in Toronto’s Rexdale neighbourhood;
- Canadian-born, Vancouver-based rapper HeatWave, born to Ugandan parents;
- Arami The Corrector (originally known as YogE), an immigrant youth of Eritrean descent born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia;
- Selekwa, born to a French-Canadian mother and a Tanzanian father;
- Kenyan-born, Sudanese spoken-word artist Yusra Khogali; and
- Kenyan-born, Shad K., whose parents were from Rwanda.

The work of these artists draws on their experiences of Blackness in Canada, and, for some, visitations to Uganda and Kenya, where they perform in a different space on Indigenous lands. The research study also explores hip hop on the African continent, drawing on media reviews of Ugandan and Kenyan artists Kenzo and Octopizzo.

Through her own travels to Nigeria with her family, the author also draws on Nigerian experiences of rap and living ‘back home’. Through literature reviews, she explores the pidgins used in Nigerian and East African hip hop and the implications of language in hip hop.

## 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about first-generation and immigrant African hip hop artists who grew up on the African continent or were born in Canada to African immigrant parents.

## 4. How was the research done?

The author conducted a **literature review** that explored evidence from education, social sciences, youth studies, and popular culture and hip hop, as well as various media coverage of hip hop artists and a study of various music videos of the featured artists. The author was seeking to examine how immigrant and first-generation African hip hop

artists portray their experiences of racism, immigration, and colonialism through rap music. The review also aimed to draw on hip hop artists' connection to their African backgrounds, their parents' lived experiences of being 'back home' on African Indigenous lands, and their own visits and performances on 'the motherland'.

### 5. What are the key findings?

The findings indicate that **long-term homeland visits** that allow participants to experience Indigenous lands and acquire Indigenous knowledges – including learning Indigenous languages – are imperative to **bring about healing and profound change in the lives of African youth**. Such visits can **build a sense of empowerment, normalcy, and confidence**.

This research also demonstrates the critical place that rap holds in the study of Black history. Rap music has been stereotyped and given a bad 'rep'. But for Black people in a predominantly white state – a site where racially-motivated violence is used against Black people on a daily basis, especially young Black males – **rap music is their most accessible, non-violent form of resistance**.

Rap's artistic delivery styles can **manifest vivid raw emotions**, particularly anger. Unfortunately, this anger is not viewed within the context of the history of white supremacist states exercising violence against Black people. When such misrepresentations of stylistic choices are not read in context, it fosters an environment of racism that produces stereotypes and negative labels. As well, the portrayal of rap as violent and degrading to women should be read in the same light as the history of white women in any historical period of any Western nation (the history and struggles of white women to earn the right to vote, to earn as much as their male counterparts, to be fairly represented in different institutions, and to have equal rights in different affairs in life, including the right of protection from violence, are read within national histories – the history of Black women and the violence and abuse against Black women also ought to be read within the broader context of racism, feminism, colonialism, slavery, and imperialism in the national histories of Canada, the United States, and European countries).

**Understanding the history of rap is not only beneficial to the dominant group, but also fosters a better understanding of Black history so that Black and African youth are aware of the political messages they portray through their music.**

### 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The research study advocates for youth programs to **invest in visits to African Indigenous lands**, which would greatly benefit African youth. It is imperative that programs, notably international student and teacher exchange programs, **include African countries as destinations** to foster relationships in schools that create an understanding of African cultures and languages. International student exchange programs have been shown to benefit youth through advancing personal growth, a sense of identity, language proficiency, and the recognition of cultural immersion as vital to creating a better world for all. Unfortunately, European destinations are often the target for such student exchange programs, with little to no consideration of African destinations.

This study further supports **teaching the history of rap as part of the school curriculum**. Incorporating rap into the mainstream curriculum would lead to a much wider appreciation of the art form and **a better understanding of its politics of resistance, its language and poetry**, and place the Black struggle into perspective for the dominant culture. In as much as the histories of the wars fought around the world lead to an understanding of how nation-states came to be and how the politics that govern them developed, **a study of rap creates a better understanding of the Black struggle and resistance** manifested through art forms that were very important in the Black resistance movements in North America. When youth of African descent understand and appreciate this art form and all it represents, they will create more responsible art that is imbued with political meanings that inform and empower.



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