

# LOCAL NOISE

## 2nd Generation Migrant Expression in Australian Hip-hop.

by Tony Mitchell.

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### Summary:

*Lebanon ain't got no money, but there's no land more greener,*

*So proud to be a child of the cedar.*

*Some Aussies can't believe it when I look 'em in the face.*

*Proud to be a wog, I mentally laid them to waste.*

*They say 'But wait, you're Australian'. 'You wait and stop your speaking,*

*I am, but I'm descendant from Phoenicians.' ...*

*What we gotta do is not forget our culture,*

*Yallah my brother, your culture given from Allah, remember your history, it helps you work harder,*

*Helps you respect more your mother and your father, Your parents or grandparents came from another land,*

*You might be Australian now but it's not your mother land.*

- Seek the Eilte, 'Child of the Cedar'

An essay that focuses on 2nd generation migrant hip-hop artists including MC Trey, Maya Jupiter, Sleek the Elite and Hau from Koolism and their distinctive use of hip-hop as a tool of expressing their status of being in-between their ethnic heritage and Anglo-Australian culture.

### About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

### 'Inbetweenness' and 'Migrant' Youth

Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas begin their edited volume *Ingenious*, a collection of essays which celebrates various subcultural expressions of multicultural, second generation and migrant youth cultural fusions in Australia, with the following definition of the speaking position of 'inbetweenness' by Stuart Hall:

*There are people who belong to more than one world, speak more than one language (literally and metaphorically), inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home, who have learned to negotiate and translate between two cultures, and who, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, have learned to live with, and indeed to speak from, difference. They speak from the 'in-between' of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being both the same as and at the same time different from the others amongst whom they live ([1996] cited in Butcher and Thomas 2003:15).*

There is a significant proportion of second generation migrant youth in Australia who inhabit this 'in between' position which enables them to articulate an Australian identity in some contexts as well as express their non-Anglo ethnic background in others, as well as mimicking and reversing the derogatory ethnic stereotypes (such as 'wog') they are often subjected to. In their 2002 essay on Lebanese-Australian youth, Greg Noble and Paul Tabar demonstrate how Arabic-speaking youth in the Canterbury/Bankstown area of Sydney articulate their hyphenated identities through a strategic essentialism which involves linguistic code-mixing and hybrid behaviour: in some contexts, for example, Lebanese-Australians might 'reassert their Lebaneseness in the face of structural disadvantage and racism', but in others they 'adopt and mimic the dominant images of them by others, and even erase their ethnic alignments' (2002: 140-141). Their mobilisation of a strategic Australian identity enables them to assert independence from their parents and traditional Lebanese codes of behaviour, while their use of a Lebanese identity enables them to assert their difference from Australian norms when appropriate. Their 'homeland' is likely to shift between Lebanon and Australia depending on the situation they find themselves in. But this does not amount to simply meeting the demands of the 'two worlds' they inhabit, rather is dependent on a strategic alignment with different contexts in which they encounter 'incommensurable differences'. Drawing on Hall's articulation of 'new ethnicities' the authors conclude that '[t]o be 'Lebanese-Australian' is thus an example of a new, multifarious configuration which consists of different identities sutured together without any one obliterating the others' (2002:144). This strategic mobilisation of different identities from an 'in between' position also occurs within Australian hip-hop.

The role of music as an expression of identity, particularly through performance, but also through participation in scenes and subcultures, has been widely noted, especially by Simon Frith, who draws the following analogy between music and identity;

*Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics (1996:109).*

It follows that the double perspective of 'in-betweenness' described by Stuart Hall can be given particularly strong expression through music, and in the case of the embodied declamatory vernacular medium of hip-hop, can be given sharply focused public expression. Such expressions of dual identity, embodied to varying degrees of confidence and assurance, are an important aspect of Australian hip-hop, frequently overlooked in debates about the desirability of Australian accents and local cultural references in what is still widely perceived as an African-American musical and performative genre. The cultural diversity of much local Australian hip-hop reflects the broader indigenisation of hip-hop by both indigenous and second generation immigrant youth throughout the world, and the frequent adoption of the four elements of MCing (rapping), DJing (turntablism), graffiti and breakdancing by young people from migrant ethnic

minorities as a conduit to explore and re-discover aspects of their homeland culture in a form of what Schiller and Fouron have called 'long distance nationalism' (2001). On the one hand, culturally diverse hip-hop crews in Australia such as Downsyde, South West Syndicate, TZU and Curse ov Dialect – with their wildly surreal 'rainbow hip-hop' – embody multiply ethnicised speaking positions which express Australian multiculturalism, pluralism and diversity. On the other, individual MCs from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds such as MC Trey, Hau of the 2004 Aria Award-winning group Koolism, Maya Jupiter, Sleek the Elite and Comrade Kos of Third Estate, who all speak from varied positions of 'in-betweenness', and are the subjects of this paper, bring a unique sense of hybridity and musical syncretism to Australian hip-hop which contributes to a highly original and distinctive view of the world and participates in an expressive form of 'transborder citizenry' (Schiller and Fouron 2001:20), of both the Australian nation and the rhetorically configured global 'hip-hop nation'. While most Australian hip-hop is in English, a factor which tends to accentuate comparisons with US hip-hop, and charges of derivativeness, and place it in a position similar to that of UK hip-hop, which has been similarly disparaged, the growth of culturally diverse elements, such as the use of Samoan, Tongan and other Pacific Island languages and cultural elements by Trey, Koolism and the Souljah Sistas, Spanish and Salsa Rhythms by Maya Jupiter, Ila Familia, the Herd, Brethren and Downsyde, along with the inclusion of Aboriginal language by artists such as South West Syndicate and Native Rhyme Syndicate, is defining Australian hip-hop as a vehicle for cultural diversity.

Writing in 1960 about European migration to Australia in the 19th and 20th centuries, Frank Thistlethwaite suggested that 'we should try and think neither of emigrants nor immigrants, and to treat the process of migration as a complete sequence of experiences whereby the individual moves from one social identity to another' (in Pozzetta 1991, 635). This rather fixed and simple notion of an unproblematic exchange of social identity, together with an implicit connotation of instability, impermanence and displacement expressed in the term 'migrant' has been widely adopted in Australia. But many second generation migrants, in the sense of those either born here or who have migrated to Australia at an early age, and who have been able to physically and linguistically re-connect with their ancestral homelands, are becoming an increasingly widespread phenomenon for which the term 'transmigrant', as mobilised by Schiller and Fouron (2001:3), is more appropriate. For Schiller and Fouron 'transmigrants' are 'long distance nationalists' for whom the 'homeland is not just a site of nostalgia; it is a location of ongoing experience' (2001:2-3). For some hip-hop MCs of non-English-speaking background, hip-hop has provided an impetus for them to re-connect with their homeland while continuing to negotiate their identity as Australians.

### **Sonic Allsorts – Multilingual MCs**

An important illustration of the 'transmigrant' multilingualism of Australian hip-hop can be found in *Sonic Allsorts: Modern Music – Native Tongues*, a highly distinctive CD compilation which showcases the cultural diversity of second generation non-Anglo migrants. A co-production between SBS Radio Alchemy, the 2003 Noise Youth festival and *Cyclic Defrost* magazine, it features tracks by 17 Australian artists from 7 states performing in over 20 languages, with code-switching a recombinant feature. It was compiled by Brendan Palmer, SBS Radio Alchemy producer, founder of the independent Australian electronica collective Clan Analogue, and prominent local and international DJ and electronica artist. Over 3,500 copies of the CD were distributed throughout Australia, mainly as a 'giveaway' in the important 'underground' music magazine *Cyclic Defrost*, which is edited and published by DJ and music writer Sebastian Chan, and profiles and reviews a wide range of independent Australian and overseas exponents of hip-hop, electronica and avant-garde music (available online at <cyclicdefrost.com>). Dale Harrison, *Cyclic Defrost* co-editor, music producer and member of Sydney hip-hop group The Herd has noted that both *Sonic Allsorts* and *Cyclic Defrost* were 'borne out of a need to represent other less emphasised elements of Australian culture, and

to reclaim from the rampant parochialism and jingoism the very idea of being “Australian” (2003:16). Australian hip-hop, given its predominantly subcultural nature as an underground, do-it-yourself phenomenon which obtains little support from the mainstream music industry and frequently gives expression to marginalised social groups (see Mitchell 2003), is an ideal medium through which to express these ‘less emphasised elements of Australian culture’.

The result of a nationwide competition linked to the 2003 Noise Festival, an Australian Youth Music festival, *Sonic Allsorts* leads off with a track in Swahili by Sydney-based hip-hop producer and MC Mr. Zux, following on with ‘Eh Mate’, in French and Punjabi, by Brisbane artist Prussia, and a Spanish rap by Adelaide based Joel Castell. The most popular track amongst the six judges by a wide margin was Curse of Dialect’s ‘Curse of the Vulk Macedonski’, which features traditional Macedonian music, dance and MCing by Vulk from the multicultural Melbourne crew who are redefining Australian hip-hop. Also scoring highly were ‘Nursery Chant’ by Sydney artist Tufa, who sings, chants and raps in the Chinese dialect Henghwa, and Latin American collective Ila Familia with their anthemic salsa dance track ‘Ven a Bailar’, produced by Mr. Zux. Anglo-Australian facilitator of Aboriginal and multicultural hip-hop Morganics follows with ‘Multi Lingual MC’, which features snippets of 15 different languages, is also included. Palmer attributes the predominance of hip-hop on the album to the fact that it is ‘the most active lyrical modern music’ and ‘a style that allows the un-represented to be represented’ (in Harrison 2003:16). Other artists on the compilation include Creator, a Tasmanian-based MC from Sierra Leone who raps here in French, but also performs in Mende, Creole and English, Mandarin MC Horny Keung, whose name comes from an evil sauna bath owner featured in the cult movie *Hong Kong X File*, as well as ‘Oiaue’, (oyawaya) a part Tongan-language, part English party track from Koolism, recorded especially for the compilation, an R&B track in Samoan, English and Cook Island Maori by Soul-Jah On, a French track with some deft scratching by Darwin-based Vassy, gamelan jazz from Indonesian artists Anything But Roy, and drum ‘n’ bass with Punjabi and Urdu inflections from Vir Asan. *Sonic Allsorts* represents a hidden face of non-Anglophone Australian music, and its use of languages other than English as well as code-switching demonstrates how hip-hop can be an important medium for retrieving the native languages of transmigrants and expressing aspects of their homeland culture. The fact that MC Hau of Koolism does not in fact speak Tongan, but learnt the lyrics of ‘Oiaue’ phonetically, also demonstrates that strategic essentialism can be articulated through hip-hop in gestures towards a homeland identity that may be rhetorical rather than actual.

### MC Trey – Tapastry Tunes

One of the most prominent second generation transmigrant figures in Australian hip-hop is MC Trey, who grew up in Fiji listening to her father’s gospel singing, along with Polynesian and reggae music. Trey’s real name is Thelma Thomas; the name Trey originated as an acronym for ‘The Rhyming’ Edifyin’ Young’un’ on her 1997 self-produced debut cassette tape with DJ Bonez, *Projectile*. Trey’s first encounter with hip-hop was when she was nine years old, at primary school in the mid-1980s in Fiji, watching videos of the Rock Steady Crew at a neighbour’s house: ‘They had a copy of ‘Hey You’ and ‘Uprockin’’. I remember seeing Baby Love and was like, “wow she’s great, I want to do what she’s doing”’. She set about finding out as much as she could about MCing and breakdancing, and at primary school she began scribbling down lyrics in exercise books. ‘I was so young and didn’t have funds or much access to hip-hop and didn’t even know what was happening in other countries, but I watched as many vid[EOS]s as I could. My older cousins would learn breaking moves off the vids and I’d learn off them, and at family parties, we’d entertain them with our dance routines’. Her cousins in Australia and New Zealand sent her the video of Stan Latham’s 1984 film *Beat Street* – the first Hollywood film about break dancing – as well as Run DMC tapes and she copied the moves and the flows.

Trey’s early breakdancing performances in Fiji coincide with an influx of breakdancing in the Pacific, particularly in Western Samoa, from which it spread to Aotearoa/New Zealand, where Maori and

Pacific Island youngsters formed breakdance teams who appeared on local television and in a national breakdance competition. As Tania Kopytko has pointed out, the US import culture of breakdancing provided these mostly disadvantaged young people, who often had little chance of achieving recognition through conventional channels such as school, sport and social position, with ‘a very strong and positive identity that did much to raise their self esteem and realise their capabilities’ (1986 21-2). It also provided both Maori and Pacific Island young people with a more accessible substitute for their own culture, which in many cases they were disconnected from, and arguably provided a conduit to gaining more knowledge about their own cultural background. Trey has admitted that she still doesn’t know a great deal about Fijian culture, but sees hip-hop as providing her with the motivation to discover it, and in the process she has re-acquired some aspects of her heritage. Her track on her debut mini-album *Daily Affirmations* ‘So Where U Wanna Go’, which addresses MCs looking for direction, begins with a description of a trip to Fiji in the context of the migratory journeys of her Pacific ancestors, before embodying the local-US syncretism of much Australian hip-hop by hooking up with African-American MC Eligh from Living Legends. Trey also uses the metaphor of her Pacific ancestors setting their seafaring course by the stars to express her own progress and direction in hip-hop.

Trey’s family moved to Parramatta in the western suburbs of Sydney when she was 11, and she pursued her interest in hip-hop by going to local jams in the then emerging Sydney hip-hop scene, which had started with breakdancing parties in the park at Burwood. In *Basic Equipment*, a 1997 documentary about Sydney hip-hop by the Maltese-Australian creator of SBS’s comedy series *Pizza* Paul Fenech, Trey talks about the way that she regards the four elements of hip-hop as modern extensions of analagous elements in traditional Fijian culture. She relates turntablism to the beats of the lali log drum (used on ceremonial occasions such as announcing mealtimes), the MC to her grandfather’s public speaking in a circle around the kava bowl, breakdancing to the ceremonial meke story-performance dances, and graffiti to cave-painting. She also draws on the designs of the tapa or masi cloth, a traditional bark-cloth used in traditional Fijian ceremonies and religious rituals, made from the paper mulberry tree into which patterns which recount ancestral Fijian stories are stencilled, stamped or smoked, as a traditional equivalent of hip-hop graffiti. Trey has used tapa cloth designs on her CD covers and website as well as wearing it in performance, and appropriating it in the name of the record label she has set up, Tapastry, and in the title of her second album, *Tapastry Tunes*. As the album liner notes state: ‘Tapa is of high significance in Fijian culture and always included in traditional, ritualistic and spiritual ceremonies throughout the island; Tapastry metaphorically represents the various elements of life experience, knowledge and creativity that interweave to create Trey – the artist and her music’.

These rhetorical and metaphorical connections and correspondences between traditional and ceremonial elements of indigenous culture and hip-hop have also been explored by Maori and Pacific Island hip-hop artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand (as illustrated in Sydney film maker Carla Drago’s 1998 documentary film *Island Style*, in which Trey appears, and in Gareth Shute’s 2004 book on hip-hop in Aotearoa). They are part of the indigenisation or ‘glocalisation’ process which has seen hip-hop take root in local cultures through out the world. As Trey has commented: ‘I feel that a lot of young people who are removed from their culture or have grown up without a culture are drawn to hip-hop because of its elements and sense of belonging it provides. For me, MCing is modern day story-telling, just like my ancestors did around the kava bowl.’ In her view, it is important for Australian hip-hop to be multicultural, ‘because it brings different music styles and tales of different lands, and can only add to the beauty of hip-hop’.

*Tapastry Tunes* begins with the sound of a ukelele, and elsewhere Trey samples sea sounds, ‘combining traditional culture with contemporary culture’ as she states. Trey goes back to Fiji every couple of years, keeping in touch with her homeland, as well as performing with other Pacific Island hip-hop artists from both Australia (such as MC Hau from Koolism, who guests on the sea-sampling track ‘The Harvest’ on *Daily Affirmations*) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Samoan MC King Kapisi and the now defunct Christchurch-based Samoan female crew Sheelaroc). At the ‘Sons of Samoa’ event at the Sydney Festival

in 2001, Trey teamed up with Kapisi and Koolism at a jam at the Bondi Pavilion, a notable locus of Maori and Pacific Island transmigrants in Sydney, in an event which included traditional Samoan tattooing and traditional music performances. As she has stated, 'It's just so fantastic to see other Pacific Islanders doing their thing and doing it well. I feel it also inspires young Pacific Islanders to do their thing as well. Pacific Island cultures are similar and our ancestors worked so closely with each other, it's hard for us not feel a sense of unity. A lot of younger Pacific Islands though are not taught their cultures, which is a shame. Events like 'Sons of Samoa' are a great way to get the younger generation interested in their roots.'<sup>1 2</sup> Events such as these also extend the Samoan diasporic scope Sarina Pearson has referred to in relation to King Kapisi:

Lyrically, Kapisi's verses might be interpreted not simply as a return to Samoa but rather the perpetuation of Samoan cultural values outside of Samoa itself, throughout a transnational and multi-local community. In a sense he offers diasporic Samoans a form of indigeneity, and a fundamental identity that is premised upon a concerted social effort to maintain the skills that in effect make them Samoan ... The visual and lyrical representations of Samoan diasporic space in hip-hop celebrate indigeneity – the fa' Samoa, and the hybrid Pacific identities that emerge in metropolitan frontiers ... By signalling the global scope of the Samoan diaspora, its urban bias, its appropriation and creativity with other cultural forms, and the enduring desire for homeland and cultural basis, it recognises and legitimises a broader definition of what it means to be Samoan (2004:464).

Arguably, an event such as 'Sons of Samoa' extends this transnational perpetuation of Samoan cultural values into an Australasian and Pan-Pacific embodiment of Polynesian cultural values which links Samoan, Tongan, Fijian and by implication other Pacific Island nations together into a joint cultural expression of both homeland and transmigrant identity. This also contains a political dimension, at a time when the Howard government had recently initiated new entry restrictions on New Zealanders settling in Australia, as a covert way of preventing Pacific Islanders emigrating to Australia via New Zealand. This was also an example where, as Pearson notes, citing the South Auckland based Polynesian hip-hop collective Dawn Raid and Kapisi and his crew's display of 'Overstayer' T shirts in New Zealand, 'Hip-hop ... mobilises exclusion as a strategic position' (2004:60).

Along with a number of other Australian MCs, most notably Morganics, Trey has also mobilised hip-hop as a pedagogical enterprise, running workshops on hip-hop and music industry skills with Maya Jupiter for disadvantaged teenaged girls in western suburbs Guildford, Parramatta and Bankstown. Between February and May 2003 Maya and Trey ran 'Feline Beats and Rhymes', a TAFE-accredited course in Contemporary Music affiliated to South Sydney Youth services and covering instrumental technique, voice, songwriting and other hip-hop skills for indigenous women, early school-leavers and young women from non-English-speaking backgrounds. At the end of the course, a CD, SoulJah Sistaz, featuring songs and raps in four different languages (including Samoan and Maori), was launched by 15 of the predominantly Pacific Island girls (as indicated by songs like 'Pasifik Beauty' and 'Island Song') together with Trey, Maya and female DJ Groovy D at the Metro, and the SBS program Insight screened a documentary segment about the course. Stand-out tracks on the CD, the cover of which features a hibiscus flower superimposed over the Sydney CBD skyline, include the feisty 'Fist It', by Krackhore, about how young women should deal with sexual harassment and insults from boys, and 'The War Track', by Jestah, about her objections to Australia's involvement in the gulf war. This pedagogical extension of hip-hop continues its articulation of homeland cultures to successive generations; it is part of a duty many hip-hop artists feel to 'give back' what they have learned from their mentors to younger generations.

### **Koolism: Pacific Island diasporic hip-hop**

Koolism are a hip-hop crew from Canberra, consisting of Tongan-Australian MC Hau (real name

Langomi-chau Latukefu) and scratch DJ wizard and producer Danielsan – who have notched up twelve years since they began performing. They collaborated with and produced Trey’s track ‘The Harvest’ on her 2000 mini-album *Daily Affirmations*, and Danielsan produced four tracks on Trey’s *Tapstry Tunes*. In January 2003 Koolism received an appreciative write-up along with other Australian rock groups in the *New York Times*, where Andrew Strauss called them ‘the standard-bearer of Australian hip-hop. Though it can throw down the funk live like the Roots, Koolism’s strength is that it sounds like a hot summer’s breeze, with nimble, laid-back rhymes and dub-heavy beats’. In October 2004 they were surprise winners for their independent label release *Part 3: Random Thoughts* of an Australia Recording Industry Association (ARIA) Award in the new category ‘best urban release’ (a rather amorphous and meaningless US music genre incorporating hip-hop and R&B) ahead of other artists signed to major labels, and DJ Danielsan took advantage of the occasion to express his endorsement of homegrown Australian hip-hop and to disparage ‘wannabe fake American’, Australian artists who mimic American accents and expressed obeisance to commercial US hip-hop. (As the award was presented by mainstream US hip-hop group the Black Eyed Peas, he then hastily qualified his comments by excluding them, which caused some mirth in the audience.) Koolism released their first cassette tape, *Bedroom Shit*, in 1996, at a time when Hau called himself Fatty Boomstix, and many local hip-hop artists were relying on limited releases of this decidedly lo-tech format, which are now collector’s items, to disseminate their work. This featured the track ‘Juss a Brown Fellow’, a celebration of the Pacific Island diaspora in Australasian hip-hop, as well as references to Hau’s troubles with police harassment. In it, Hau maps out the diaspora of what he refers to as ‘Australasian rap’, following a rhetorical track from Australia to Aotearoa-New Zealand and through the Pacific Islands of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau and New Caledonia. Koolism’s two 12 inch vinyl EPs, *Blue Notes* and *The Season*, which were both included on their debut album *Koolism Part 1*, have achieved quasi-legendary status on the Australian hip-hop scene. Hau’s Tongan extended family appear in the video to ‘The Season’, filmed at a barbecue in a Canberra park. Although the track doesn’t feature any specific Tongan references, being mainly about relaxing and having a good time in summer, the video’s combination of Hau’s hip-hop crew with his extended Tongan family shows how easily the two combine, and the mock breakdancing contest at the end complements the soccer at the beginning as an expression of community leisure pursuits.

The remixed version of the track ‘Blue Notes’ on *Koolism Part 1* has particular Pacific island inflections, featuring a ‘Pacific strum’ guitar riff under an autobiographical account of Hau’s childhood and Tongan family and trips back to the homeland for funerals of family members, sampled Tongan language from his Grandpa Ma’ ilei, and some mellow jazz electric guitar by Sione Latukafu. The cover consists of a montage of photographs of members of Hau’s extended family and a number of Tongan funerals, while dedications on the record, instead of the usual hip-hop ‘shout outs’ to fellow crews, MCs, DJs and sources of inspiration, run as follows:

*Love and dedication to: My Grandmother (Fe’ao Ma’ilei): Mum misses you hard and so do the rest of us. My Latukefu Grandparents (Alopi & Vaimoana): I wish I had the chance to share your knowledge and wisdom. Kolovai to the fullest. The legacy continues ... My Latukefu uncles: Maile, Tevita & Sione: Miss you all so much, Keep Looking Over me. Uncle Sione, I’m trying to live up to my name ... bare[sic] with me. My uncle, Sione Ma’ilei: you were always proud of me. Much love, uncle. My aunty Heilala: I miss your laughter and happiness. Haloti Faupula, even though I couldn’t understand most of what you were saying, I could still feel the strength and emotions in your sermons. And to my lil bro that could have been – I often think how you would’ve looked and behaved. You would’ve loved to be part of this family. Much love, bro. This is also dedicated to the loving memories of those who passed away in your lives. May they rest in peace (Koolism 2000).*

In place of the hip-hop tropes of neighbourhood, community and locality, Hau substitutes his Tongan ancestry and lineage. Hau was born in Canberra; his parents, Lu’isa and Lesoni Latukefu, migrated there from Tonga more than 30 years ago. He has stated:

*Unfortunately, they didn't really teach me the language because they figured we were in Australia and they decided it would be a lot easier for me to just speak English so I could communicate with the people around me and go to school without the language barrier problem. They taught me the customs but it wasn't a strict Tongan household (in Stenlake 2004:53).*

Like his countryman Jonah Lomu, he was something of a prodigy in rugby union, and at a certain point had to make the decision to devote himself to hip-hop rather than rugby. He has commented that being Tongan makes him unafraid to express emotion, which sets him apart somewhat from the more macho aspects of much local hip-hop:

*Growing up as a Tongan – we are very emotional people. I have Australian friends and I go to their houses, and there's nothing wrong with it, but you know, their fathers are always like 'You gotta be the tough guy. Don't cry son'. The way I was brought up, my father cooks and cleans, but he's a proper man, but he's emotional as well. So I'm not scared to be open like that whether it's through rhyme or everyday life. ... Tongans go to a lot of funerals. It's such a small community in Australia so every Tongan knows each other and everyone goes to the funeral. So I've been brought up going to funerals and crying and being able to deal with emotions (in Stenlake 2004: 57).*

While *Koolism Part 1* offers a distinctive example of Pacific Island indigenisation of hip-hop, *Koolism Part 3* moves away from celebrations of Hau's Tongan heritage, which are mainly signalled in a live track where Hau introduces the shout-out 'Polynesia!' Apart from two tracks featuring autobiographical accounts of Hau's childhood and schooldays, the album moves towards a more drum'n'bass, party and club-oriented form of hip-hop, which has proved popular but which doesn't highlight Hau's Tongan background. This suggests that, as with much US hip-hop, there is a perception that achieving popularity may be incompatible with any strong degree of minority ethnic representation. Nonetheless, like New Zealand-born Pacific communities, Australian-born Pacific Island hip-hop artists like Koolism and Trey are arguably, in the words of Paul Spoonley,

*developing new cultural forms and identities which are challenging both the origin communities (or 'homelands') and cultural traditions, and the institutions and beliefs of the society of residence. They are renegotiating the rules of entitlement and belonging, coming as they do from a position of multiple loyalties and identities, and being in a community that maintains strong transnational networks' (2001: 94-5).*

### **Maya Jupiter – cangurita hip-hop**

Maya Jupiter, along with MC Trey – whom she has cited as one of her main sources of inspiration, along with Koolism – is one of the most prominent women hip-hop artists in Sydney. The host of the ABC's national youth radio network Triple J's weekly Australian hip-hop show since January 2004, she is also a former host of pay TV Channel [V]'s *Soul Kitchen*, a former presenter on SBS Radio's *Alchemy*, and a club MC in both hip-hop and R&B circles, as well as fronting the 11 piece salsa band *Son Veneno*, and running hip-hop and music industry workshops for disadvantaged girls. She was born in La Paz, Mexico to a Turkish mother and a father from Baja California. She came to Australia when she was one-year-old, and like both Trey and Hau, did not speak her native language at home. Her older sister introduced her to the salsa clubs and Latin American clubs in Sydney, where she was often rebuked for not speaking Spanish, but she soon became involved in Latin American music groups as a dancer and singer, before gravitating to R&B clubs. When she was 17 she went on her first trip to Mexico, and took a Spanish language course in preparation for the trip:

*I enrolled myself in a six week course, then I went to Mexico for about three months and picked it all up because I'd heard it my whole life. I lived with my aunts and uncles, who didn't speak a word of English. For weeks I was there with a dictionary just trying to communicate and I really threw myself in the deep end. But on the other hand my grandmother in Mexico was an English teacher so she was able to teach me because she was the only one*

*who was able to talk to me and translate between all the family. I'm not fluent but I can converse.*

In Mexico, Maya, whose real name is Melissa Martinez, was referred to as 'cangurita', a Mexicanisation of her Australian identity. As well as performing in Spanish with Son Veneno, Maya drops lines and words of Spanish into her raps, and 'Mamacita', one of the tracks on her debut album *Today* is dedicated to her mother, who suggested she take the name Maya Jupiter:

*That song was about the divorce of my parents and I guess it was very personal and I was really deciding whether I should put it on the album or not. Even when I recorded it I was like 'Oh damn' – you know it was very full on. But now the band plays it and we perform it at gigs and sometimes I think people don't catch it but you obviously catch it! It was a song that I needed to get out about my father because I didn't see him for about seven years, which I think incited the whole fascination of wanting to know about the Mexican culture, because up until the age of twelve you don't know what you are. People ask you and you go 'I'm half Mexican and half 'Turkish' – 'Oh that's unusual'. Growing up as a teenager I just didn't know any Mexicans at all – there were none in Australia and we don't have a community, although we are everywhere, we are all around the place – so that song was about that.<sup>3</sup>*

One of the album's highlights is 'Songs of Freedom', which she wrote at the airport in Mexico City after her second trip back to her homeland, and which poignantly compares the plight of illegal Mexican immigrants in the USA to the current situation with asylum seekers in Australia, and with issues of social injustice around the world, making reference to the neo-Zapatista movement in Chiapas in Mexico. In her performances with Son Veneno, which crosses over with her work as an MC, She draws heavily on the musical knowledge of her brother-in-law, who is conversant with a wide range of Mexican and Latin American styles of music, from mariachi to narcocorrido:

*My brother-in-law has been such a huge influence because he is Mexican and a mariachi. He went to university and studied musicology and things about Latin American rhythms, all of that. So when my sister married him he was really my teacher in a lot of ways. And he played on the album – he plays Latin American harp and percussion – congas and things like that on 'The Truth' and 'Mamacita' as well. Don't tell anyone, but one day I'm going to do mariachi hip-hop, because they have all these violins and horns and guitars and stuff. I'd love to do something like that!*

Maya's track 'The Truth', which, among other things, expresses frustration at the lack of music industry recognition for Australian hip-hop, and praises community radio and Triple J for facilitating to the growing national spread of awareness of it, is featured in both an English and a Spanish version (the 'Venenosa remix') on the album:

*it was about the whole scene, that feeling of a young artist not being supported. Just feeling you're really going against the wind ... my brother-in-law wrote the chorus in Spanish 'Contra el viento' ... 'Even when going against the wind I will fight, if you give me your hand I will take it.' Meaning 'if you help me out I will take that help, but if you don't it is cool because I'm still going to get there anyway ...with this passion I feel right now I know I will get there'.*

'Getting there' involves negotiating a position of 'in-betweenness' where hip-hop and Latin American music scenes become intertwined:

*[Son Veneno] are an eleven piece band and we've got Latin jazz musicians. Our director Cesar plays bass guitar and he and his brother play traditional Chilean music – we've got so many sounds all through the group – Latin, jazz, hip-hop – they're all fused. Sometimes we do shows for the Latin community, but if we go to the hip-hop scene, we are a bit too Latin for hip-hop so it is like where do we fit in? On my album launch it was the wickedest night. I wasn't sure how people were going to react but Son Veneno played their own set – their own original sounds and some covers, and I stayed out of it and then they played most of the songs from my album live with different arrangements – putting horn lines in, and it was just amazing.*

Maya's first music video, 'Ordinary Night', which contains extra lyrics by Venezuelan-Australian salsa DJ Dwight 'Chocolate' Escobar of the Spanish language hip-hop group Ila Familia, is set in a salsa club, using Maya's Latin American dancing companions, and she has spoken of the negative response she got to it from the hip-hop scene, which gave her added resolve to celebrate her musical 'inbetweenness':

*They always say in hip-hop 'keep it real' and 'be true to yourself'. So for me that was being true to myself. And I remember back then looking on some chat boards and seeing 'Oh Maya she is just a booty shaker blah blah blah' ... And I remember consciously trying not to dance around on stage and just rap, so when I read that I got so shook up and so angry and so hurt. I realised you are never going to win with people, you've just got to be yourself and feel good, and you find that people who have those confines might shut you out and say 'OK I don't like that, for me that is not hip-hop'. Other people will like the fact that you're being yourself and letting go.*

Maya's dilemma in crossing between the worlds of hip-hop, salsa, and R&B, which command a much larger audience than hip-hop, but is perceived by many hip-hop 'heads' as being a debased commercial type of music which lacks the authenticity of hip-hop, expresses a particular inflection of 'in-betweenness' which produces both positive and negative consequences. The situation of Fiona Ta'akimoeaka, one of the backing singers in Son Veneno, who is distantly related to Hau of Koolism, is another distinctive embodiment of 'in-betweenness' involving cross-ethnic negotiations. Of Tongan extraction, in the early 1990s Fiona launched her career as a singer with Swoop, a hip-hop/soul/R&B group who appeared on the first-ever compilation of Australian hip-hop, *Down Under by Law* (1989). She later became the lead singer in Kamara, the resident band in the Sydney Latin American nightclub La Campana from 1996 to 1998, before taking the stage name Bandida – also the name of the band she sang in, along with her Latin American husband. Fiona became particularly attached to the Cuban salsa genre of timba, which she embodied in a song entitled Mecanica:

*At the time I was a mouthpiece for my husband. When I sang that song, I was expressing what he thought about himself. Now the song symbolises my own struggle to assert myself as a female singer in timba, a male-dominated genre. The lyrics express the singer's sense of self-esteem and pride at being the best at everything. Musically brilliant, sexually irresistible, charismatic, street-wise, tough and wise cracking. All the features seen as desirable for the Cuban uberman. Every time I sing it I feel a sense of empowerment. ... I love timba for its aggressive male hypersexuality. As an emasculating female, timba appeals to my desire to be dominated by a male as I had been by my father who ruled with an iron fist. Sexuality was severely repressed in my household. The overt sexuality of timba is definitely an integral part of the performance of my music and my identity.*

Singing Mecanica enabled her to negotiate the machismo of timba and use it as a vehicle to express powerfully her own gendered identity, as well as negotiating her own displacement and isolation from her Tongan identity, which she found a replacement for in Latin music and Latin American culture:

*As part of the diaspora, I am dislocated from an island that is not my home and yet it is defined as where I come from. In Sydney, my family lived in the eastern suburbs, again dislocated from any sense of 'Tonganness' I could have had if I had grown up with other Tongan families around me. In a sense, the search for identity is the story of my life. Through music I have sought an identity, first as a pop star and later as a salsera. Latin music is part of my identity because it fills the space where a Tongan identity was lost. I speak better Spanish than I do Tongan and I identify with and feel at home with Latinos. Among Tongans I feel like an anomaly.<sup>4</sup>*

The sense of community Fiona gained from salsa, speaking Spanish and mixing with Latin Americans provided her with a public identity which she could assume through both performing songs and mixing in a Latin music environment. Her exchange of her Tongan identity for a Latin identity exemplifies the way that Frith has defined the expression of identity through music not as a direct reflection, but as an active process of imaginative creation and construction, an embodiment of 'the mobile self':

*identity is not a thing but a process, which is most vividly grasped as music. Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective ... The experience of identity describes both a social process, a form of interaction, and an aesthetic process (1996:110).*

### **The Middle Ground – Lebanese-Australian hip-hop**

There is also a strong Lebanese presence in Australian hip-hop. Sleek the Elite, a flamboyant and witty rapper and freestyler, who raps about Australian racism, political life, capitalism, sexual encounters, solidarity with Aborigines and his Lebanese-Australian background, has been perhaps the most prominent. After releasing his debut album *Sleekism*, the 1997, he went on to star in SBS's popular 'wog' comedy show *Pizza*, directed by and starring Paul Fenech, which takes 'wog' comedy to new extremes of gross bad taste and political incorrectness. Sleek (aka Paul Nakad) played himself as a character in the series, and ended up withdrawing from the program in 2004 after a dispute over the rights to his hip-hop name. In both *Pizza* and his recorded output he negotiates a very thin line between parody and espousal of the more misogynist and homophobic posturings of US gangsta rap and the ostentatiously vulgar displays of wealth endemic to the 'bling bling' aspects of mainstream US hip-hop, complete with jewellery, fawning 'babes' and macho boasting. The cover of Sleek's eponymous 2003 EP features him borne aloft by five busty blondes, while the title track features his name intoned as a refrain by a girlie chorus, interspersed with quotations of Missy Elliot's sexual come-on 'Get 'ur Freak On' and string of anecdotes of sexual prowess. But his signature track 'Child of the Cedar', written in 1992 and included on *Sleekism*, includes references to Sleek's own Lebanese background alongside espousals of Aboriginal land rights and attacks on Anglo-Australian xenophobia and the culture of 'beer and meat pies', adding Middle Eastern musical inflections to the hip-hop beats, mixed by DJ Soup. The track includes the following expressions of pride in his Lebanese heritage and a sense of 'long distance nationalism' for his mother land:

*Lebanon ain't got no money, but there's no land more greener,*

*So proud to be a child of the cedar.*

*Some Aussies can't believe it when I look 'em in the face.*

*Proud to be a wog, I mentally laid them to waste.*

*They say 'But wait, you're Australian'. 'You wait and stop your speaking,*

*I am, but I'm descendant from Phoenicians.' ...*

*What we gotta do is not forget our culture,*

*Yallah my brother, your culture given from Allah, remember your history, it helps you work harder,*

*Helps you respect more your mother and your father, Your parents or grandparents came from another land,*

*You might be Australian now but it's not your mother land.*

Sleek features a sequel to this track, 'Child of the Cedar Part 2', on his 2004 album *Hard For A Rapper*, in which he is even more forthright in his assertion of his Lebanese identity and his attack on the Australian press, television, police, the government as well as the One Nation Party ('I'd rather listen to Marilyn Manson than Pauline Hanson'). A more rock-oriented, guitar-based album than its predecessor, co-produced by Ser Reck of pioneering Australian hip-hop group Def Wish Cast, *Hard for a Rapper* contains Sleek's trademark boasting about sexual prowess ('girls like to blow me') and aggressive self-aggrandisement, and he even threatens his audience (to): 'Attack you like Anzacs with bayonets dance

like a minuet'. 'Child of the Cedar 2' features an Arab-styled clarinet and 'hey hey' chorus reminiscent of the Yardbirds' 1960s rock anthem 'Over, Under Sideways Down', and while also addressing his fellow Lebanese-Australian citizens, it is framed as

*A message to the government*

*I'm home grown cedar and love it*

*Can't hear 'cause you trip busy America butt lick*

*And back Zionism instead of Lebanon and Sleekism*

His personification of 'Sleekism' as a mythological equivalent to Lebanon indicates the degree of his playful self-aggrandisement of his Lebanese identity, which is given further dramatisation in the album's final track 'Poet from Way Back', a mock Arabian-Nights-styled spoken word story-piece which claims to be from 3,000 years ago, with drum and orchestral backing, in which the poet Boulos, the son of a peasant, is loved by the princess 'Salima the latifah'. The poet is identified with Sleek and Salima is described as 'a child of the cedar', and after Boulos recites a poem in the king's court the king promises him anything in his kingdom, Boulos chooses the king's daughter, the king realises his love for daughter, kills Boulos, while the Daughter slashes her wrists, and the track concludes 'and with the poet went knowledge'. Sleek's playful interweaving of his own identity as a rapper, poet and ladies man with ancient Arabic poetry and storytelling embodies a comfortable negotiation of his role as a Lebanese-Australian battling racism, discrimination and stereotyping with his strategically playful assumption of figurative Arabic personae. Sleek mobilizes his inbetween position by using hip-hop as a political forum to exhort other Lebanese-Australian youth to be proud of their heritage and to act responsibly, but at the same time he expresses a more comic, parodic approach to hip-hop which plays with its more macho aspects in relation to women.

A far less assured, and more conflicted autobiographical statement of the dilemmas of the 'in-betweenness' of being Lebanese-Australian comes from Comrade Kos of the group Third Estate in the track 'Middle Ground'. Kos, born in Australia to a British mother and a Lebanese father, expresses a poignant sense of alienation and displacement which comes from not feeling a strong sense of belonging to either Anglo-Australian 'skip' society on the one hand, where 'someone'd always have to mention incest and monobrows', or 'Leb' society on the other, and he became 'ashamed of my identity to the point where I was asked I'd often say I wasn't Lebanese'. As he raps in 'Middle Ground':

*At around sixteen I started hanging with ethnics more than around skips. Seldom did they show any form of true hate. For the first time I felt a bit at home, like I was welcome with my new mates. I started to regret how I'd repressed that Leb side of me, 'cause half of me'd never fit into the ethnic society ... It was just embarrassing, What the hell's a Leb who can't speak any Arabic?*

Finally, 'fed up of always trying to be either Leb or skip but never mixed', he resolves, 'No more am I gonna be a slave to what people truly think. I keep on doing my thing in the middle ground.'

Unlike Trey, Hau, Maya or Sleek, who are by and large able to celebrate their cultural heritage as well as their Australian identity and articulate their 'in-betweenness' in a positive way through hip-hop, the dilemma Kos gives expression to in 'Middle Ground' is one of lacking the opportunity to return to his father's homeland, learn his native language, explore his heritage at first hand, or identify strongly as being Lebanese, while having to undergo xenophobic slurs despite identifying as Australian. Here Hall's definition of 'in-betweenness' as 'ways of being both the same as and at the same time different from the others amongst whom they live' becomes a trap where the subject is not allowed either the comfort of being the 'same' or the fascination and cultural capital of being 'different'. The protagonist of 'Middle Ground' is trapped in his 'in-betweenness' and has to resign himself to the vacarious identity-formation process of 'hanging with ethnics' in order to experience a displaced sense of home and belonging.

This displaced sense of ‘long distance nationalism’ where the homeland is not a ‘location of ongoing experience’ can be frustrating, and represents a rite of passage experienced at school and sometimes beyond by many of the non-Anglo participants of Australian hip-hop. By all accounts, Cousin Kos, whose track ‘It’s Time’ uses the Australian Labor Party catchphrase to celebrate underground Australian hip-hop and attack the mainstream Australian pop music industry, and ‘all these pop stars who sing about the luxuries money brings, playing the clown in the hunt for millions’, has given up hip-hop as a vehicle to express his ‘in-betweenness’, perhaps in search of a less ambivalent, less conflicted mode of expression.<sup>5</sup>

As Shane Homan has noted in relation to the reception of different forms of popular music by non-Anglo young people in western Sydney, ‘[p]opular music will remain an ambivalent site of cultural tension for youth in attempting to reconcile a diversity of influences with contemporary desires’ (in Butcher and Thomas 2003:196). This cultural tension between diversity and contemporary desires is embodied particularly strongly in hip-hop, a declamatory and often oppositional form of direct address which provides a vehicle for both celebration of cultural difference and articulations of the tensions, conflicts and dilemmas of ‘inbetweenness’. This is articulated ably and aptly in *Jammin’ in the Middle E*, a television comedy drama broadcast on SBS in February 2006, in the wake of the Cronulla riots in Sydney, in which ‘ethnic gangs’ of Lebanese-Australian youth were demonised in the mass media and by the State premier Morris Iemma, among others, when they ran riot and beat up Anglo-Australians and smashed their cars, after a particularly ugly racist rampage by drunken Anglo-Australians draped in the Australian flag. Based on a series of workshops with young Arabic-Australians in Bankstown, *Jammin’ in the Middle E* is a very positive, affirmative portrayal of the negotiations of Lebanese-Australian youth with the moral and cultural dictates of their parents, and features the Palestinian-born rapper NOMISE, who combines Arabic lyrics and music with hip-hop beats, and has also performed with traditional Aboriginal musicians. The finale of the drama features a party at which the father of NOMISE’s character learns slam poetry and rap based on the traditional Lebanese improvised poetry Zajal, which is one of NOMISE’s main influences. Hip-hop thus becomes a way of uniting different generations – yet another mode of expression of inbetweenness.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Trey here uses the commonly-used colloquial term ‘Pacific Islander’ to refer to people from Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau. Paul Spoonley has pointed out, ‘The traditional label “Pacific Islander” is a racialised box ... which does not adequately acknowledge the diversity amongst those from the Pacific or those descended from migrants from the Pacific. Furthermore, the term “Pacific islander” has had, and continues to have, negative connotations. The preferred term, although it still has limitations, is “Pacific peoples”, following the example set by the Ministry of Pacific Island affairs (2001:96). I have used the adjective ‘Pacific Island’ throughout, since it is difficult to form an adjective from ‘Pacific peoples’, but in doing so wish to underline the diversity of identities it refers to.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Trey quotations are from an interview with Tony Mitchell, October 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Maya Jupiter quotes from an interview with Tony Mitchell, November 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Ta’akimoeaka, from an essay on music and identity in *Music and Popular Culture*, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, November 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Jamil Khuri for drawing my attention to Comrade Kos.

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