

LOCAL NOISE

Australian Hip-hop as a Subculture

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Summary:

Originally published in the journal *Youth Studies Australia* <<http://www.acys.info/journal>> in 2003, *Australian Hip-hop as a Subculture* is an essay that applies ideas from subcultural theory to Australian hip-hop, relating the defining features of Australian hip-hop to the theories that the 'Birmingham School' applied to subcultures like Punk in the 70s.

About:

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.

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Introduction: Revisiting Subcultural Theory

Gelder and Thornton's massive *Subcultures Reader* provides ample evidence of the continuing fascination which youth subcultures in their various guises have held for sociologists, anthropologists and exponents of cultural studies since the 1950s. As Thornton states in her general introduction to this volume, one of the principal precepts of subcultural studies – and there is possibly a case for making it a sub-branch of cultural studies – is 'that the social groups investigated in the name of "subcultures" are subordinate, subaltern or subterranean'. This status may either be conferred by the subcultural groups themselves, or by mainstream social prejudices based on 'social differences of class, race, ethnicity and age' (1997: 4). In the past decade there has been widespread critique of the 1970s 'Birmingham School' CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) approach to subcultures spearheaded by Cohen (1972), Hall (1976) et al., Willis (1978), and Hebdige (1979), and its apparent misplaced emphases on modernist, Marxist and Althusserian readings of subcultural 'resistance' against state hegemony, along with its over-emphasis on working class distinction and its reinforcement of male dominance (eg. McRobbie & Garber, 1997, Muggleton 2000, Macdonald 2001). This study sets out to retrieve some of the CCCS precepts in the revisionist interests of demonstrating that notions such as 'homology' and 'bricolage' (Hebdige 113-117), are still usefully applicable to the contemporary global subculture of hip-hop, which began in the South Bronx in New York, 1979, after most of the CCCS work had ceased, and which is given just two marginal and tangential mentions in Gelder and Thornton.

While Muggleton claims that the eclecticism of punk in the late 1970s ushered in 'postmodern subcultural time' and 'a glut of ironic revivals, amorphous hybrids and individual bricoleurs refusing traditional identifications' (2000: 162-3) which broke down the defined homological boundaries of 'traditional' subcultures, hip-hop arguably constitutes a much more clearly defined, circumscribed and discrete music-based subculture which could be seen to constitute, in the words of Paul Gilroy, a form of 'populist modernism' (1993: 45). Similarly, Andrew Ross's description of hip-hop as a 'counterculture', with its inherent conflicts and contradictions, could be appropriated towards its re-definition as a subculture:

Hip-hop, from the first, has been a social movement, which has come to bear all of the full-blown contradictions of a counterculture in its own right. Having emerged in the Bronx as an explicit alternative to gangland culture, hip-hop's subsequent rise to international prominence has been shaped by the tension between its status as socio-political commentary and its status as a commodity (1992: 60).

Hip-hop, then shares the tensions between social commentary and commodification that Hebdige's reading of punk displayed, and like the predominantly male subcultures studied by the Birmingham school such as teddy boys, mods and rockers, bikers, skinheads, soccer hooligans and rastas, hip-hop has been largely male-dominated, tends to have a certain uniformity of dress code, and contains strong and closely maintained visual and performative affinities and alliances between its visual forms (graffiti, clothing), its dance expressions (breakdancing) and its musical and performative idioms (MCing and DJing). It also shares with its subcultural predecessors an appropriation of public urban space through graffiti, breakdancing and public open-air events involving DJing and MCing. And like the subcultures studied by Hebdige (92ff), hip-hop in its US context was quickly subjected to incorporation by mainstream mass media and commodification by the mainstream popular music industry, with all the attendant implications of moral panics (eg. the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, Eminem, misogynist, homophobic and violent lyrics), ideological distortion, corporatisation, trivialisation and 'othering' of an 'alternative' youth subculture.

But while many of the British subcultures the CCCS focused on were arguably, at least in their initial manifestations, inherently 'local' or national manifestations of youth expression specific to the UK, hip-hop is one of the most global of youth subcultures in that it has been appropriated and 'localised' throughout the world, along with its global rhetoric of the 'hip-hop nation' (see Mitchell 2000, 2001).

This suggests that it can be usefully regarded as a global youth subculture with its four elements, MCing, DJing, graffiti and breakdancing, representing globally-defining, homologous activities which mark out hip-hop as a subculture which, in Macdonald's words, 'may be defined as that which constructs, perceives and portrays itself as standing apart from others in an isolated, defined and bounded group' (2001: 152). In contrast to the seemingly highly fluid, mobile, transient and fragmentary 'postmodern', border-shifting subcultures Muggleton describes, with their high degree of stylistic pastiche, cross-genre hybridity and eclecticism, hip-hop represents a far more dogmatically entrenched, stable subculture with a series of associated values, skills and beliefs associated with notions of authenticity, and relatively fixed ethical and stylistic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

What follows will focus primarily on Australian hip-hop, which has arguably become a major youth subculture since the 1990s. There is a growing body of academic writing on Australian hip-hop (Maxwell, 1994a, 1994b, 1997b, 2003; Maxwell and Bambrick, 1994c; Mitchell 1995a and b, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003; Iveson, 1997; D'Souza and Iveson, 1999), but little which makes explicit reference to subcultural theory. One exception is Maxwell (2003), who in the context of a discussion of the limitations of subcultural theory, nonetheless suggests that homology theory could be read as having informed the 'interpretive practices' at play in the Sydney hip-hop scene in the mid 1990s:

The Hip-hop logic of representation suggested (and engendered) a belief in a form of structural necessity, in which a rap, a breakdance, a graffiti piece is a manifestation that could be read, within the interpretive community, as being determined by the immutable, underlying essence of Hip-hop: a folk homology theory, perhaps (2003: 262).

While this is perhaps rather too rigid an application of homology theory to three of hip-hop's four elements – and one which overlooks the importance of scratch DJing – it does emphasise the strong degree of cohesion and interdependence which binds the practices of MCing, DJing, breaking and graffiti as components of an over-arching hip-hop aesthetic, ideology and subculture. Elsewhere, Maxwell suggests that prominent practitioners and exponents of hip-hop in Sydney in the mid-1990s did not regard themselves as forming a subculture:

It was not a sub-culture, but a fully proportioned culture, whatever that might mean. Mick E and J.U.'s [freestyle rap] battle is a way into understanding a self-conscious project of the production of culture, revealed through a complex of contested, negotiated, and disputed knowledges, practices, desires, and, as Thornton only tentatively suggests, beliefs (2003: 34).

Insisting on an alignment between the academic observer or ethnographer's socio-cultural perspective and that of the hip-hop practitioner under study seems unnecessarily restrictive, not to say impracticable, and certainly does not negate or refute analysis of hip-hop in terms of subcultural theory and its homologies and affinities with other subcultures. As in the case of the nebulously defined rave culture, whose practitioners and analysts seemingly bestowed upon it willy-nilly the status of a fully-fledged culture, for reasons which were hardly made manifest, hip-hop practitioners are of course entitled to see themselves as part of a global cultural grouping (such as the rhetorical 'hip-hop nation') rather than a sub-group. And while Thornton proposes the notion of 'subcultural capital', adapting Bourdieu, as a criterion of 'hipness' and 'being in or out of fashion' (1995: 11, 14) in rave, club and dance music cultures (or subcultures), the subcultural stakes are arguably much higher in hip-hop – and arguably in a number of other subcultures – in terms of a fanatically-held belief system based on authenticity, skills, and notions of value which distinguish 'keeping it real' from what is considered 'wack' (trite and inauthentic). Subcultures are largely constituted as such by conventional and mainstream social and cultural perspectives, which contribute to their marginalisation and 'othering' and define their outsider status, rather than participants in the subcultures themselves. Macdonald, on the other hand, suggests a rather more restricted and empirically-based reading of this outsider status of subculture in relation to graffiti:

'Sub' not in the sense of different from or beneath other groups and cultures, as this would involve outsiders' own value judgments. But 'sub' as in separate from. A subculture may be defined as that which constructs, perceives and portrays itself as standing apart from others as an isolated, defined and bounded group. Definition is thus made possible, but it must come from the members themselves (2001: 152).

Exactly how and why this definition of a subculture must come from its members themselves Macdonald does not specify, but this restriction seems to place an unnecessary impetus for self-definition on the members of the subculture rather than the analyst, even though the title of Macdonald's book is still *The Graffiti Subculture*. Maxwell's identification of some of the sub-groupings of hip-hop in the interests of distinguishing it from other youth subcultures likewise appears to place considerable impetus on self-definition:

They are not all 'rappers', 'rhymers', 'writers', 'bombers', 'DJs', 'selectors', 'breakers', or 'b-boys', and I rarely heard the term 'Hip-hoppers'. Unlike 'punks', 'goths', 'ravers', 'hippies', 'bikers' ... the whole pantheon of sub-cultural identities ... the people (almost exclusively male) whose practices, beliefs, discourses and knowledges I came to know were not so explicitly, self-consciously concerned with constructing their own identity as with the alignment of their (already existing) selves with 'Hip-hop.' Thus, I would hear 'I'm into Hip-hop', or 'ninety percent of my life is Hip-hop; the other 10% I'm asleep', or better still, 'I eat, breathe and sleep Hip-hop' (2003: 37-38).

While the widely-used consensual terms MC, DJ, breaker and writer seem quite adequate ways of describing the exponents of the four elements of hip-hop both to themselves and the outside world, (along with more socially concessionary terms such as rapper, turntablist, breakdancer and graffiti or aerosol artist), without any need for the added stigma of inverted commas, Maxwell risks mystifying hip-hop into a quasi-religious cult of self-dedication and identity submission. This overlooks both Frith's important observation that musical practices function as important processes through which identity is actively imagined, created and constructed – as opposed to simply reflecting identity – (1996) and evidence for the socio-cultural function of musical subcultures such as hip-hop as particularly effective means of vernacular expression of self-identification for many young people of indigenous, Pacific Islander and non-English-speaking background (see Mitchell 2003).

Ten Subcultural Aspects of Australian Hip-hop

The following ten aspects of Australian hip-hop, based on observed discourses in the Sydney hip-hop scene over a five-year period, could all be regarded as contributing to its designation as a subculture:

1. It often locates itself – and is located by mainstream media – as 'underground' in relation to the music industry, the mass media, and mainstream society. This is a principal defining feature of its 'subordinate, subaltern or subterranean' status.
2. Another important feature of its 'subaltern' status is its strong DIY (Do-It-Yourself) aspect in producing recordings, concerts, media and public events.
3. It has been subject to sporadic bursts of commercial commodification and incorporation as a musical genre (rap) which serve to further entrench and consolidate notions of authenticity.
4. Graffiti remains a largely illegal, clandestine and surveillance-defying subcultural activity.
5. Hip-hop remains a largely male-dominated, music-based activity with strong homologies between its four elements.
6. Hip-hop practices tend to follow – with local variations – internationally recognised, US-derived dress codes, musical idioms, dance movements and visual styles.

7. Hip-hop practices are based on strong ethical, stylistic and largely universal notions of authenticity delineating ‘true hip-hop’ from commercial commodifications.
8. There is a strong attachment by its advocates to the four elements of hip-hop as alternative epistemologies and as important identifiers of places of origin, neighbourhood, family, community and ethnic group identity (through crews, posses etc.). This is linked to a strong pedagogical dimension.
9. There is widespread use of different forms of stylistic bricolage in hip-hop practices of sampling, MCing, breaking, and graffiti.
10. Most of hip-hop’s activities follow implicit ‘career’ paths complete with skill-based hierarchies, values and rules.

1. Former hip-hop radio DJ and music press columnist Miguel D’Souza begins his liner notes to the 1997 compilation *Homebrewz vol. 2: A Potent Mix of Australian Hip-hop Flavour* as follows: ‘perennially unsellable, Australian hip-hop is a dim light at the margins of Australian music, a glow that has lasted for perhaps up to fifteen years ... real Australian hip-hop music and culture has become “invisible”, unable to be separated from the mainstream hip-hop culture’. As Maxwell (1997) has noted, both major rap albums by Australian artists which had any noticeable impact on the local music scene in the mid 1990s contain references to Australian hip-hop’s underground status in their titles. Sound Unlimited’s *A Postcard from the Edge of the Under-side* was released by Columbia/Sony in 1992 – the only Australian rap album until 2002 to come out on a major label – and Def Wish Cast’s *Knights of the Underground Table*, was released on the group’s own independent Random Records in Penrith 1993. As Maxwell has noted (2003), opinions about these two albums are widely divergent within the Sydney hip-hop scene, with Sound Unlimited generally being regarded as commercial sell-outs, and Def Wish Cast respected as one of the major defining crews in Australian hip-hop. As Maxwell stated, ‘Slickly engineered, aggressively marketed and distributed, the Sound Unlimited album contrasts with the low-tech, hand-made self-distributed Def Wish Cast product. Both crews, from Sydney’s western suburbs, take pains to assert their “authenticity”, both in their lyrics and in their discourses about themselves’ (123-4). As Sydney-based editor of hip-hop fanzine *Stealth*, hip-hop promoter and 2SER radio DJ Mark Pollard notes ‘[Sound Unlimited] were mocked to some degree by the more underground crews’. Pollard regards Def Wish Cast, on the other hand, as ‘the quintessential Sydney hip-hop crew ... few crews have been as well-rounded and have made such a large impact ... *Knights of the Underground Table* became a manual for Australian hip-hop. ... The clip for ‘A.U.S.T.’ gave a face to Australian hip-hop and was pivotal in shaping generations to come’ (2002: 124). Underground status here becomes equated with authenticity and establishing an historical precedent for a national formation.

Lack of media coverage also defines underground status. Since 1994, there have only been three major newspaper features dealing with Australian hip-hop. Richard Guilliat’s *Sydney Morning Herald* feature ‘U.S. Eh?’ (1994) suggested that Australian youth culture in general and hip-hop in particular betrayed an allegiance to the USA, and his distortions and omissions angered many of the Sydney hip-hop community whom he had interviewed (see Mitchell 1999). George Epaminondas’s 1999 Metro feature ‘Sista Act: The fresh faces of hip-hop’ focused on the Sydney women’s hip-hop collective Mother Tongues’ Australian tour and new release *First Words*, as well as other hip-hop artists such as Koolism, MetaBass’n’Breath and Sleek the Elite. He noted hip-hop’s ‘lack of mainstream recognition ... in Australia by major record labels, radio stations and media in particular’ (1994: 4), but his article contained such basic, glaring factual errors as stating that MC Trey was Filipino-Australian (she is Fijian-Australian) and Sleek the Elite was from Melbourne (he is from Sydney) as to totally discredit it. Ian Shedden’s 2001 Australian feature ‘Hip-hop to the Trip’ suggested that the recent success of hip-hop-funk-Oz rock crossover acts like the Avalanches, Resin Dogs and 1200 Techniques (whose 2002 debut album was only the second Australian hip-hop release on a major label), youth radio station Triple J’s Australian hip-hop show and promotion of Mass

MC's track 'The BBQ Song', along with its 2001 national tour featuring MC Trey, Shin Ki Row and Reference Point, was giving Australian hip-hop a higher profile. Shedden claimed that 'a growing number of artists are emerging from the underground with music that is more expertly recorded and produced', and 'the barrier preventing rap in an Aussie accent being taken seriously is starting to crumble (2001: R18). He also discussed the Adelaide-based compilation *Culture of Kings*, and included a separate feature on MC Trey, who is frequently used, along with Maya Jupiter, to provide a media-friendly female, multicultural image for Australian hip-hop. (It is worth emphasising that these two female MCs owe their prominence in the Sydney and national hip-hop scene primarily to their talents and abilities.) But the implications of Shedden's article were that it was only by joining forces with aspects of Oz rock that Australian hip-hop was beginning to find a wider audience. 1200 Techniques' DJ Peril is a veteran of the Melbourne hip-hop scene, and both the Avalanches' DJ Dexter and Resin Dogs' DJ Katch are also regarded with respect in the Australian hip-hop community, but the music of these three groups is generally regarded as something of a mainstream sell-out.

2. Until the late 1990s, it was customary for new Australian hip-hop albums to be released on self-produced cassettes: Trey, Koolism, Noble Savage (featuring Blaze), Easybass and Fathom all produced first cassette releases which are now collectors' items. As Pollard has noted, this 'Tape Culture' was another defining aspects of Sydney's Do-it-Yourself hip-hop underground: 'Everybody dubbed tapes for each other because more often than not the tapes would sell out due both to demand and small print runs ... Almost everyone owned a dual-tape stereo instead of today's CD burners, computers and MP3 players. Bring back tape culture' (2001:124). Similarly, most Australian hip-hop CDs have been released on self-produced CDs (eg. Sleekism Records, Fuglemen, Illegal Records, Dope Runner Records) or small independent labels like Parallax View, Elefant Traks, Random Records (who reputedly never paid Def Wish Cast), or local independent label Mushroom Records' offshoot MDS/MXL. The principal distributor of Australian hip-hop on CD is Creative Vibes, a small outfit run by Mother Tongues founder Heidi Pascal, which also distributes local and overseas dance music and electronica. Other production companies like Trent Roden's Slingshot Concepts and Mark Pollard's Stealth combine production with radio DJing, concert and DJ battle competition promotions, and the Urban Xpressions and Stealth hip-hop festivals which have taken place in Sydney most years since 1998. With the exception of the Triple J hip-hop show, most media outlets are also DIY: from the hip-hop shows on community radio stations like 2SER, Bondi FM and their equivalents in other cities, to the *Vaporz* graffiti fanzine (which was founded by Blaze in 1988 and which Pollard claims 'was the first hip-hop magazine in the world' 2001: 124) to *Stealth* and the regular hip-hop columns and features in the free Sydney weekly music press *3D World*, *Revolver* and *Drum Media* and their equivalents in other cities. One of the main disadvantages of all this DIY activity is that the production standards are often low and cheap and products are consequently rejected or criticised by mainstream media outlets.

3. The two instances of Australian hip-hop acts being signed to major labels – Sound Unlimited to Sony/Columbia in 1993 and 1200 Techniques's *Choose One* – which also won an Aria Award in 2002 – to Sony's 'independent' label Rubber Records in 2001, have already been mentioned. There was much discussion within the Australian hip-hop scene about the hefty sum of money which 1200 Techniques had to pay to EMI to clear their use of a sample from US soul group Hot Chocolate's track 'Brother Louie' – an extravagance that could only be permitted by a major label, and one which was seen as indicative of the mainstream orientations of 1200 Techniques. While such examples of musical commodification are rare in Australian hip-hop, other aspects of hip-hop culture – particularly commercialised hip-hop label clothes, and Sydney clubs such as Cave, rnb, and Mothership which specialise in mainstream US rap and R&B, and the use of hip-hop music, graffiti, DJs and breakdancers on television advertising, particularly by Coca Cola – present manifest examples of the undesirable commercialisation and commodification of the genre, along with the saturation of mainstream music video channels and music charts with mainstream US commercial rap videos. Arguably there are so many examples of hip-hop commodification around most cities

and mediascapes that authentic hip-hop easily stands out.

4. Hebdige mobilised Eco's term 'semiotic guerilla warfare' (1972) to describe the 'subversive practices' of bricolage (1979: 105), but it could be even more effectively mobilised to describe the illegal hip-hop practice of graffiti (or 'graff') writing on trains and city walls. While Hebdige (1979: 3) used the metaphor of deciphering graffiti to describe his readings of postwar youth subcultures and styles, he also noted that pre-hip-hop graffiti 'can make fascinating reading. They draw attention to themselves. They are an expression both of impotence and a kind of power – the power to disfigure (Norman Mailer calls graffiti – "Your presence on their Presence ... hanging your alias on their scene" (Mailer, 1974))'. Mailer's expression is particularly apt in describing the 'tags' or assumed names which graffiti writers adopt. Baudrillard has also made pronouncements about hip-hop graffiti in New York – referring to it as 'purely graphic and indecipherable. Implicitly it still says: 'I exist,' yet, simultaneously, 'I have no name, I have no meaning, I have nothing to say.' (1988: 30) Baudrillard's myopia about the meanings of graffiti arguably demonstrates his lack of 'subcultural capital' and echoes that of the general public who decry it as 'vandalism', and reinforces the subcultural codes and epistemologies required to read and understand hip-hop graffiti.

As Macdonald has shown, notions of social resistance, although not necessarily class-based ones, are implicit in the illegal aspects of the graffiti subculture, which has particular affinities with other 'classic' subcultural forms of expression in its wilful separation from mainstream society and the 'outside world' (2001: 151). Issues raised by graffiti and its vandalising of public spaces, walls and railway carriages are particularly vexacious, with most hip-hop graffiti artists persisting in flouting the law in expressions of 'aerosol art' which are highly dangerous, and which cost local councils and railways millions of dollars a year to remove. Debates have circulated in Sydney about the merits and demerits of graffiti, and while tagging – where the writer simply scrawls his name in texta over a wall – has little to recommend it, some of the larger 'pieces' (as in 'masterpiece') and 'throwups' to be seen along railway lines are colourful and spectacular. Hebdige's comments about subculture in *Hiding in the Light* are an apt description of hip-hop graffiti:

Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light' (1988: 35).

5. Hebdige has cited Willis's use of the term 'homology' to identify

the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyle of a group, its subjective experience and the music forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns ... the internal structure of any particular subculture is characterised by an extreme orderliness: each part is organically related to other parts and it is through the fit between them that the subcultural member makes sense of the world (1979: 113).

This is particularly evident in the relationship between the four elements of hip-hop, and frequent descriptions by its practitioners of hip-hop as a 'way of life', a global community and a nation. MCing, DJing, breaking and writing are organically connected and interdependent in defining hip-hop as a subculture. All are predominantly male-defined activities which only appear to admit female practitioners in the margins. Maxwell has described the homology in hip-hop between its language and its obvious manifestations of machismo:

The Hip-hop world I encountered was for the boyz, a masculinised, even phallogentric world in which young men performed, rapped, breaked, boasted, bombed, leaving their phat tags to mark their presence, hung out, strutted, posed with their legs thrust out and their hands hooked in low-slung pockets, fingers brushing their groins. Where young men talked about their Community, Culture, Nation (2003: 59-60).

This is unsurprising, given its origins and development among young African-American males in city ghettos throughout the United States, and the misogyny (continually referring to women as 'bitches' and 'hos'), homophobia and violent posturing masculinity in the lyrics of African-American hip-hop are

well known. These have been effectively exposed and analysed in relation to both dancehall reggae and hip-hop in Isaac Julien's 1992 film narrated by Paul Gilroy, *The Darker Side of Black*. Julien shows how the homophobia of Buju Banton and the misogyny of groups like Brand Nubian can assume a Christian or pseudo-Islamic guise (Brand Nubian belong to the African-American 5 Percent Nation). As Cornell West summarises in Julien's documentary, much of the misogyny and homophobia in hip-hop is simply attributable to the ignorance of adolescent boys which is given prominence in rap music. Maxwell's description suggests that the largely Anglo-Australian males he analyses mimic to a certain extent the testosterone-fuelled postures of their US counterparts ('boyz in the 'hood'), and at the time of his analysis there were few women in the Sydney hip-hop scene. He even suggests that the few women there were in the scene were forced to adopt tomboy poses to win respect:

Women tended to win respect through the adoption of specifically masculine embodiments and habitus, by becoming what in other contexts would be known as tomboys. Even the most broadly respected female writer coded her own femininity into her graff practice, writing 'Sugar' and 'Spice' (61-62).

This was before the rise to prominence of MC Trey, Maya Jupiter, Jade Nemesis, Ebony and the Mother Tongues collective, most of whom are feisty, brown-skinned women who do not modify their behaviour in any way to earn the respect of their male peers. MC Trey's track 'Feline Forces' is a homage to the female rappers in the US and elsewhere, from Roxanne Shante to the present, who have given her courage and inspiration. Spice (aka Charlene), whom Maxwell treats rather harshly here, got into graffiti writing through hanging out with her brother, appeared with her baby in the video clip for Def Wish Cast's defining 'A.U.S.T.', and is now the mother of two sons who are reaching graffiti age, and still prone to head for the railway yards on occasion, as well as running graffiti workshops for disadvantaged girls in Western Sydney. But given the degree of danger graffiti involves, it is not surprising it remains a male-dominated activity, and Charlene remains the exception to the rule. A similar case could be put for the demanding physical skills required for breakdancing and the exacting technical skills required for DJing, both of which activities tend to attract few women (although the number of 'B Girls' in Sydney is on the rise).

There tends generally to be an emphasis on competitive skills in hip-hop, as illustrated by the regular all-male DJ 'battles' held in Australia and around the world, leading up to the world DMC championships, and the preponderance of breakdancing competitions and MC battles. Graffiti could also be regarded as an essentially competitive, male-based activity. Hip-hop's excessively masculine manifestations represent some of its ugliest aspects, and while fortunately the bragging and boasting and self-aggrandisement of African-American male rappers can hardly be matched by their Australian counterparts, they do contribute to constituting hip-hop as a predominantly male subculture in which women represent a small, growing, refreshingly different, and hopefully destabilising, minority.

6. The baggy oversized pants and loose baseball-style tops which many hip-hop practitioners wear are said to derive from US prison clothes, which are issued in one (very large) size only and hence stigmatise hip-hop's outlaw status. They are also comfortable and durable for strenuous activities such as breaking, MCing and graffiti writing, and able to absorb sweat in hot environments. It also also been suggested – mischievously, given the homophobia prevalent in US hip-hop – that this loose clothing also facilitated homosexual activity in prison. The hooded tops and Kangol wollen beanies which have become something of a cliché in hip-hop fashion circles could both have originated from the need to preserve anonymity when fleeing from the police, as well as from the need for protective warm clothing on graffiti raids and for head protection in breakdancing. Consequently much hip-hop clothing appears to have criminal or quasi-criminal origins. Given the inflated prices that African-American designer hip-hop gear with labels such as Spike Lee's Three Acres and Mule sells for, this is highly ironic. Sneakers and baseball caps remain de rigueur for many hip-hop practitioners, suggesting homologies in African-American hip-hop with basketball and baseball as exclusively male activities in which African-Americans excel. (Greg Tate has suggested that black music shares with black basketball 'an actualisation of those black ideologies that articulate

themselves as antithetical to Eurocentrism ... rooting black achievement in ancient black cultural practices' (1992: 86)). The gold chains affected by African-American hip-hop practitioners are said to signify both their origins in slavery and their attachment to ostentatious wealth, and tend not to have been adopted in other parts of the world. It is common for hip-hop artists to promote clothing labels or even in some cases to start their own labels, indicating that clothes, if not a 'fifth element', are an inherent part of hip-hop. Some Australian MCs and hip-hop aficionados affect self-consciously Anglo-Australian styles of dress, such as stubbies and singlets, and 'daggy' sunhats, while others dress in accordance with their ethnic origins (Pacific Island tapa cloth, Aboriginal colours, Lebanese cedar pendants, etc.). Women also generally seem much less bound by the uniformity of hip-hop's prison-based male dress codes. The Melbourne-based group Curse ov Dialect affect outlandish costumes such as trees in the interest of 'keeping it surreal'.

7. Hip-hop values relating to authenticity, such as 'keepin' it real', 'hardcore' and 'true style', all emphasise values associated with serious realism in terms of the content of MCs' lyrics, and hard-earned skills in terms of DJing, breakdancing and graffiti. Other value-based terms such as 'phat' and 'dope' (as opposed to 'wack') indicate notions of excellence based on hierarchies of 'respect'. Many of these derive from the undeniable skills of US practitioners (such as scratch DJs like the former Invisibl Skratch Piklz from San Francisco, or the Beat Junkies, or MCs such as Aceyalone, who have conducted major underground tours of Australia). These values tend to be tacitly accepted and skill-based; 'wack' MCs or DJs are usually easy to spot. As Murray Forman has suggested (rather long-windedly) in the US context, 'the conflation of the ghetto as a privileged sociospatial site and an idealised image of black authenticity within hip-hop discourse has continually threatened to override other possible images of lived cultural space among the hip-hop generation, regardless of one's racial identity' (2002: 61). This dictatorship of 'ghettocentricity' in US hip-hop is often adhered to, at least rhetorically, in hip-hop scenes outside the USA. D'Souza and Iveson have suggested that even in the Sydney hip-hop scene, 'Blackness has become a kind of measure of "realness" in many of the clubs featuring American hip-hop music both in terms of who gets played and who gets down' (1999: 59). This puts the impetus on non-black hip-hop scenes to find more skill-based notions of authenticity. Maxwell has suggested that in Sydney 'the solution is to identify an authenticity deriving not from colour or race, but from a notion of truthfulness to oneself. It turns out that it is okay to be white and into Hip-hop as long as you don't misrepresent who you are, as long as you do not simulate blackness' (2003: 236). Both Forman and Maxwell cite white commercial US rapper Vanilla Ice as a glaring example of inauthenticity in the sense of a white rapper trying to imitate African-American styles and moves. (And reportedly a number of Triple J announcers made snide references to Vanilla Ice when the Adelaide hip-hop compilation *Culture of Kings* was featured on the station's playlist in 2002.) But as D'Souza and Iveson have noted, citing Petrovic, Kokiris and Kalinowska's 1994 'westie' novel *Living Large*, the whiteness of Anglo-Australian 'skips' prevents them from any comfortable homology with hip-hop clothing styles, whereas for non-Anglo Australian 'wogs', 'the cultural tools of hip-hop style and music, provided by the market, make a credible alternative' (1999: 60) to the normative whiteness of Australian society and give the subaltern status of non-Anglo Australians important subcultural capital. Hence there is identification of hip-hop with Aboriginal, Maori, Pacific Island, Lebanese, Hispanic and other ethnic youth groups (see Mitchell 2003).

'Flow' – irrespective of lyrical content – is an important aesthetic and stylistic measure of an MC's authenticity (and is also applicable to the ease and fluidity of the other three elements); as Maxwell has suggested, it may even become almost transcendently self-defining;

the refrain of the flow, its potential to move beyond, to the point at which it is impossible to say anything of it other than that it is flow, is territorialised by narrative, is made music: the excess of being is articulated to a meaning; this is Hip-hop (2003: 319).

8. Linked to notions of authenticity is a belief in the four elements of hip-hop as alternative forms of epistemology. The term 'droppin' science', which reputedly originates from the Five Percent Nation and its

emphasis on codes and the 'Science of Supreme Mathematics' (Parvaz 2003), is indicative of the emphasis placed on the MC's knowledge. (Naturally this remains a rhetorical emphasis; it is of course frequently difficult to take the pronouncements of many MCs seriously. The notion of circulating knowledge and cautioning against gangs, violence and drug dealing began to circulate in hip-hop in the early 1990s through Boogie Down Productions' notion of 'infotainment' as expressed by their leading figure KRS-One, who once stated 'Stop the violence or I'll hit you.' KRS-One now fronts the Christian 'Temple of Hip-hop' and spouts conventional religious pieties.) Hip-hop's codes of knowledge are strongly linked to notions of place, belonging, and the tropes of family and neighbourhood (the title of Forman's book is *The Hood Comes First*) and the necessity to represent these places through the four elements.

In the context of Sydney, as d'Souza and Iveson have pointed out, this means acknowledging the importance of Burwood Park in the inner west in the early 1980s, where young people began congregating to breakdance and listen to hip-hop, and 'also because of its importance as a hub for Sydney's rail system ... [which] provided the space in which graffiti could flourish' (1999: 58). In their track 'Tales from the Westside', Sound Unlimited reconstructs a history of the Sydney hip-hop scene in the Western Suburbs, locating its origins in the suburb of Burwood in 1983: 'Let's get back I'll start at Burwood Park hip-hop breakin after dark many crews would join the fray travel from east to west upon the train some to break some to inflict pain.'

Pedagogy is an epistemological aspect of hip-hop that is growing in importance, as Dimitriadis has shown in an exclusively African-American context, arguing that hip-hop's commercial success in the US 'speaks to the urgency with which youth from all across the economic, ethnic and racial spectrum are trying to define and redefine themselves in the face of massive and everpresent uncertainties about identity' (2001: xii). While the dubious 'pedagogical rap' of socially-conscious US groups such as the Poor Righteous Teachers, X Clan, Boogie Down Productions and others introduced the notion of pedagogy into hip-hop in the late 1980s, its educational applications have been widely explored in the form of community-based youth workshops which have generally taken place outside of school contexts – further evidence of the subcultural nature of hip-hop. Pollard identifies the growing number of community centres and workshops as 'the sometimes-hidden piece of Sydney hip-hop culture puzzle' which has trained and developed a significant number of young hip-hop practitioners (2002: 124). The work of hip-hop workshop facilitators such as Peacefender (Khaled Sabsabi), MC Trey, Maya Jupiter and MC Wire, Brotha Black, Monkey Mark and particularly Morganics is important in this respect. In 2002 Morganics received mainstream recognition in the form of a special commendation in the NSW Parliament Law and Justice Awards for his hip-hop and performance workshops in rural and regional New South Wales. He has run numerous hip-hop workshops with Aboriginal youths in Darwin, Alice Springs, Wilcannia and throughout Australia, as featured in the 2000 ABC television program *Desert Rap* and the 2002 CD *All You Mob!*

9. Bricolage is endemic to the semiotics of each of the four elements of hip-hop, as well as to hip-hop clothing, as we have already seen. Sampling, based on the reproduction of existing break beats, musical phrases, TV jingles, sound bites, snippets from film soundtracks, language learning recordings, etc. has, together with sequencing, been a major feature of DJing and beat production since hip-hop's origins, and have, in Andrew Goodwin's words, 'eroded the divisions not just been originals and copies, but between human- and machine-performed music ... [and] place authenticity and creativity in crisis' (1988: 262). But sampling and sequencing have been easily absorbed into hip-hop notions of authenticity and creativity, which often insist on scratchy vinyl and static sounds as an indicator of historical authenticity in sampling. Much MCing arguably consists of a considerable amount of quotation and verbal bricolage from various sources, as well as the use of acknowledged global English catchphrases like 'word up', 'in the house', 'listen up' etc. Breakdancing, which derives from a diverse bricolage of body moves including the Brazilian war dance capoeira, kung fu movies and Japanese Ninja movements, is an embodied multiethnic expressive idiom which allows for considerable indigenisations and local embellishments in which the influence of Aboriginal, Maori, Pacific Islander and Latin American dance forms can be found (eg.

Kopytko, 1986, Torp, 1999). Hebdige has described breakdancing as 'overtly pledged to the sublimation of fight into dance, of conflict into contest, of desperation into style and a sense of self respect' (1988: 216). His description emphasises the dynamic, kinetic and bodily subjective nature of this hybrid physical form in a way which completely negates Baudrillard's ossifying tourist's eye view of it in his book *America*:

'Break-dancing' is a feat of acrobatic gymnastics. Only at the end do you realise it was actually dancing, when the dancer freezes into a lazy, languid pose ... the pose you see in Etruscan tombs. ... You might say that in curling up and spiralling around on the ground like this they seem to be digging a hole for themselves within their own bodies, from which to stare out in the ironic, indolent pose of the dead (1988: 19).

Graffiti, with its various styles of lettering such as wildstyle (slanted lettering), bubble writing, New York style, and others adopted from advertising graphics and other sources, is also redolent with bricolage in its appropriation into local hieroglyphics in Australian cities.

10. Macdonald, searching for affinities between 'deviant and respectable careers' (2000) analyses the 'career path' of the graffiti writer, who ascends from apprentice tagging to planning and executing pieces:

Obviously, the careers of a graffiti writer and a stockbroker are not identical, but ... [s]tandardised stages of activity define graffiti writers' developments and position them within a form of group hierarchy. Just like an employee in a large company, writers starts their career at the bottom rung of this ladder and, through hard work, try to move up. ... This subculture translates financial reward into symbolic capital, namely fame, recognition, or, as Mear outs it, 'the respect of total strangers.' Symbolic or not, this is a highly valued wage (2001: 64-65).

This symbolic capital of fame and a career path beginning from learning skills in workshops and apprenticeships also translates into MCing, DJing and breakdancing, all of which can be ranked competitively according to local 'battles' and their implicit hierarchies. The fame may be exclusively local, but it is an important form of distinction and prestige which keeps the subculture alive and provides it with a defining structure. In the process of maintaining its 'subordinate, subaltern or subterranean' status as a subculture which exists apart from the 'normal, average and dominant' (Thornton 1997: 5) mainstream society, hip-hop can be seen to appropriate some of the values and criteria of the mainstream in order to consolidate its own distinction and difference. In the process, hip-hop becomes a way of life, a community and a nation which in some respects is almost a microcosm of mainstream society in exhibiting many of the 'classic' features of a youth subculture.

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