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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we provide a brief overview of the development of Hip Hop culture in Australia, looking specifically at rap and breaking (breakdancing). We show how Australian rap has for a long time been dominated by white Australian artists attempting to solidify an Aussie Hip Hop identity distinct from the United States. Because rap from Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities did not fit the tropes of dominant (white) Australian culture, and were instead disregarded as simple mimicry of African American rap, the gatekeepers of Aussie Hip Hop for a long time locked out these minority artists. This created a divide in the rap scene that reflected broader Australian racial politics. In contrast, the breaking community has historically been more inclusive and reflective of a multicultural Australia, and has been more connected with the breakers of North America, Europe and Asia. In this contribution, we demonstrate how Australian Hip Hop has evolved over the past two decades to be more culturally inclusive, supported by key Australian artists, community radio, social media and finally validated by the Australian music industry as a distinct musical genre worth celebrating.

KEYWORDS

Hip Hop
rap
breaking
Indigenous
migrant
multicultural
racism
identity

In many ways, to understand Australian Hip Hop[1] cultures (plural), is to understand the complex landscape of Australian identity politics. That is, the dynamics between the dominant white Australia and marginalized Indigenous and multicultural communities, the ongoing effects of British colonization, fears of American imperialism, geographic isolation and desire for a distinct identity.

1. We use the term Hip Hop in solidarity with many Hip Hoppers and Hip Hop scholars out of the United States who have fought to assert sovereignty over the term, born from the Hip Hop community and outside the realms of academia. Long time Hip Hop practitioner–scholars Tasha Iglesias and Travis Harris even took this matter up with the

American Psychological Association (APA) and *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, who have historically dictated how Hip Hop should be spelled, arguing that, 'Hip Hop is a culture by definition and as a result is considered a proper noun and must be capitalized' (Iglesias and Harris 2022: 124–28).

2. This contribution is informed by our knowledge and experiences in Sydney's Hip Hop scene, and so we recognize that our contribution is Sydney-centric, and largely limited to rap and breaking. While much of the scholarly discourse on Hip Hop can be generalized across all jurisdictions in Australia, there are a number of Hip Hop milieus that exist in remote, regional and other urban centres that simply cannot be covered within the prescribed word length of this article.

3. The term Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) was introduced in Australia in 1996 to refer to all of Australia's ethnic groups other than English-speaking Anglo-Saxons. It replaced the term 'Non-English Speaking Background' (NESB) so that it could be used to describe communities with diverse languages, ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, traditions and religions, and is used nationally in social policy, health, research and education. It is an important term in the context of Australia, since over half of all Australians were either born overseas or have a parent born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

This contribution[2] will provide an overview of Hip Hop culture in Australia by focusing on Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) rap and situating it within broader developments of Australian Hip Hop (such as breaking).[3] This CaLD variety of Hip Hop culture was for a long time eclipsed and invisibilized by the mainstreaming of a culture once commonly and parochially known as 'Aussie Hip Hop' (rap), which was dominated by white artists. In this contribution, we show how Australian Hip Hop reproduced the power dynamics of broader Australian society, as many in the dominant group worked to reinforce the marginalization of the minority group. Over the last decade, however, Indigenous and CaLD Hip Hop artists have seen greater success and visibility as a result of a growing diversity within radio and other traditional media outlets, new media platforms such as social media, as well as an opening up of festivals and other venues providing opportunities for non-white Hip Hop practitioners to express themselves, be seen and heard.

In Australia, Malcom McLaren's music video 'Buffalo Gals' (1982) inspired many breakers, rappers, DJs and writers to start their foray into Hip Hop (d'Souza and Iveson 1999; Maxwell 2003; Mitchell 2006, 2008; Munkimuk 2022). While breaking has been the first Hip Hop element to gain widespread popularity, the more illicit, less socially acceptable element of graffiti was also burgeoning in the early 1980s, with the underground practice of tagging trains and other public spaces with the graffiti artist's signature or more elaborate, larger and colourful pieces starting to emerge. During this era, films were an important site of inspiration and knowledge consumption, including *Flashdance* (1983), *Style Wars* (1983), *Wild Style* (1983), *Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin'* and *Breakin' 2* (1984). Many Hip Hoppers recount watching the films and going out and practising the moves in the local park (Mistery 2017). The popularity of these films that portrayed *all* the Hip Hop elements also helped to wards the emergence of DJs and MCs. Alongside these elements was an explosion of Hip Hop fashion in Australia in the early 1980s.

By the late 1980s, however, as the 'fad' of Hip Hop started to wane, few dedicated practitioners were left in Australia. Due to the immense geographic space of Australia, these multi-element practitioners and crews were spread across the vast country, with Superstarz crew in Sydney, Wickid Force crew in Melbourne, Bboy Allstars crew in Brisbane, and Hip Hoppers Hi-Five and Maze in Perth. Over the next decade they maintained their relationships, and facilitated new connections with international practitioners, through sharing VHS training tapes (a practice also noted by Canadian scholar Mary Fogarty in 2006) and through Hip Hop magazines. Australian magazines such as *Vapors*, *Hype*, *Blitzkrieg* and *Stealth Magazine* became a means through which Australian practitioners not only maintained visibility but also connected with artists overseas. These magazines included mainly graffiti, and also portraits of overseas breaking crews predominantly from Europe and Africa. Alongside Hip Hoppers who travelled overseas to make connections in person, the global distribution of these magazines constituted starting points for a correspondence and eventually exchange of VHS tapes (Mistery 2017). The Bboy Allstars from the state of Queensland became internationally known via their tapes for their impressive power moves and Australian variations.

While up until this point Hip Hop had attracted people from a diversity of backgrounds, between the 1990s and the 2010s, as the rap scene started to separate from the breaking scene, fans and artists became divided on the question of how Hip Hop was to be understood and practised in Australia: what does an Australian rap identity look and sound like? The core ethics of

Hip Hop that emphasized building community and developing individual expression or making your own style or 'rep', would be interpreted very differently according to the practitioners' own identity positions. As a reflection of Australian society in general, the dominant perspective in Australian Hip Hop often came from a place of white privilege, divergent to the world-views of artists and fans who were Indigenous or multicultural or lived in predominantly Indigenous or multicultural communities. How these disparate groups in the rap scene made sense of and constructed their culture and 'Aussie Hip Hop nationalism' has been the subject of much Australian Hip Hop scholarship and several documentary films (Mitchell 2001, 2006, 2008; Maxwell 2003; Saunders 2006; Rodger 2019).

For artists from a white European background, Hip Hop often became a vehicle to create their *own* local identity and culture separate from US rap and Hip Hop. This distinction was made audible by rapping in their own 'ocker'[4] Aussie accents about distinctly white Australian themes and narratives (e.g. 'The Festival Song' by Pez), science fiction ('Evolution Machine' by Def Wish Cast), comedy (e.g. 'Everytime' by Butterfingers) and locales (e.g. 'City of Light' by Hilltop Hoods) (see Mitchell 2008). While there are examples of Aussie Hip Hop demonstrating introspection (e.g. 'Bad Habits' by Kerser) or 'knowledge of self', what Afrika Bambaataa termed the 'fifth element' of Hip Hop culture (Gosa 2015), many 'Aussie Hip Hop' artists and fans venerated lyrical skills over social or political commentary. One such group out of south-west Sydney, Def Wish Cast, who practised and still practise all the elements of Hip Hop, asserted such a distinction from US Hip Hop, before the term 'Aussie Hip Hop' even existed (Kingsmill 2012).

This concept of 'Aussie Hip Hop' became separated from a largely Indigenous as well as CaLD community of practitioners who were responding differently to the styles and traditions of US Hip Hop. For example, Punjabi Sikh MC Sukdeep Singh aka L-FRESH the LION from south-west Sydney strongly related to Tupac's music as 'his stories of displacement. Talking about oppression, subjugation, marginalisation, but also empowerment, all of that really spoke to me' (2018: n.pag.). As such, more US-American rap music from Black groups like Run DMC, Ice-T, NWA, Ice Cube, Public Enemy, Tupac and Biggie Smalls was consumed by Australian minority groups while white-dominated 'Aussie Hip Hop' did not connect with them, understandably, for a long time. As Lee Monro, aka Figg Kidd, a white male rapper who grew up in the predominantly CaLD community of south-west Sydney, explains: 'When we heard American Hip Hop that resonated with us. We didn't even know that Aussie Hip Hop existed because […] it never had a place in our communities […] we had people getting stabbed and shot in our area' (Monro 2018: n.pag.). There were clear resonances between the street narratives from US Hip Hop artists with that of the lived experiences of Monro's own 'hood', compared to the 'soft' narratives of Aussie Hip Hop (Monro 2018: n.pag.). Some of the earlier Indigenous and CaLD Hip Hop acts from the late 1990s to early 2000s included Indigenous and Lebanese crew South West Syndicate, Fijian Australian MC Trey, Lebanese Australian Sleek the Elite, Aboriginal William Jarrett aka Wire MC and many more. Often the lyrics dealt with issues that were considered unsavoury at the time but are now receiving airplay, including the over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples (e.g. 'Locked Up' by Briggs and Marliya); Indigenous social justice (e.g. 'Black Lives Matter' by Birdz) and Indigenous sovereignty (e.g. 'January 26' by A.B. Original). Even though white Australian crews like Def Wish Cast formed alliances with and

4. A distinctly broad Australian accent more widely known through iconic Australian public figures like Paul Hogan, who sold this Australian identity through films like *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and tourism commercials (e.g. 'throw another shrimp on the barbie').

NOTABLE DJS

- Dexta (2000 runner-up DMC Champion)
- DJ Armee (Downsyde)
- DJ Bonez (leading Australian DJ performing solo and for multiple Australian Hip Hop acts, including Funkoars and Muph & Plutonic)
- DJ Izm (Bliss n Eso)
- DJ Jay Tee (Last Kinection)
- DJ Moto (Whitehouse)
- DJ Murda One (Def Wish Cast)
- DJ Peril (1200 Techniques)
- DJ Ransom (Resin Dogs and Ku-Ling Brothers)

ESSENTIAL GRAFF WRITERS

- Dash (Perth)
- KAB101 (Adelaide)
- Kasino (Brisbane)
- Ladie Poise (Perth)
- Puzl (Melbourne)
- Scotty Styles (Sydney)
- Snooze (Sydney)

performed alongside Indigenous and CaLD Hip Hop artists, including South West Syndicate, 'minority' Hip Hop acts were for a long time largely ignored by radio stations, venues, music festivals and even scholars (Mitchell 2006).

The adoption of and adaptation to Hip Hop culture for Indigenous peoples was a natural extension of an already established transcultural communication with Black America dating back to the early twentieth century. The post-Second World War period in particular saw many visiting African American sailors, artists and political activists share knowledge on civil rights, activism and pop culture (see Minestrelli 2017). These transcultural communications between African America and Indigenous Australia continued from the late twentieth century to present, with African American Hip Hop acts seeking out Indigenous Hip Hop artists for collaborations, and to more broadly demonstrate solidarity with Indigenous Australia. In particular, Redfern in Sydney has been a key site where Black American and Native American artists, Indigenous and other people of colour visit and commune with Indigenous Australians. Koori Radio, Sydney's Indigenous radio station situated near The Block[5] in Redfern, has regularly hosted artists including Lauryn Hill and Wyclef of the Fugees, who performed an impromptu concert at the local youth centre, Salt-n-Pepa, who drove down Eveleigh Street handing out free tickets to their concert (McDermott 2009); Snoop Dogg (Lucas 2018); Public Enemy (Maxwell 2003); Michael Franti and other celebrities, such as Muhammad Ali and Michael Jackson (Morris 2013; Mitchell 2006). This transculturalism persists today with The Kid LAROI, an Indigenous rapper from Redfern who is a testament to this legacy of transcultural unity through his collaborations with Juice WRLD and recent crossover into the US charts.

The divide within the Aussie rap scene from the early to mid-2000s was felt by many, including Maya Jupiter, a Turkish-Mexican-Australian MC and radio host of Triple J's[6] the *Hip Hop Show*: 'there were two Hip Hop scenes, there was an Indigenous Hip Hop scene and an Australian Hip Hop scene. […] And obviously it's a reflection of our society' (Jupiter 2018: n.pag.). For Hau Latukefu, a Sydney-based MC of Tongan descent and member of Hip Hop duo Koolism: 'it was very white too. Unfortunately, that led to a redneck element creeping into the scene – not so much in the artists, but in the listeners' (Young 2017: n.pag.). There was also a small proportion of artists who exclusively consumed Aussie Hip Hop and vowed to hold Aussie Hip Hop up as its own distinct genre, displaying what Rodger described as 'xeno-racism' (2019: 14–15). Rather than a platform for inclusivity, Hip Hop was used by some to reassert existing, racially informed structures of power. This division between the two scenes could also be seen in the differing approaches to language and accents (Mitchell 2008). Those that identified more with US Hip Hop often rapped in an American accent and were criticized for doing so by those who identified more with the rhymes and positionalities of (white) 'Aussie Hip Hop'. Many Indigenous rappers and rappers from CaLD communities who all identified with and listened more to Black American Hip Hop felt that this requirement from the dominant Aussie Hip Hop community of the mid-2000s was yet another means to exclude them, and consequently further entrench the divide between the two communities.

Despite Australia's ongoing colonization by the United Kingdom, British rap and Hip Hop has not been as influential. It was not until drill emerged from the United Kingdom featuring Black UK artists that Australian acts, mostly Pacific Islander crews from lower socio-economic areas, produced music in a similar genre, for example, Onefour from Mount Druitt (Sydney),

5. The space the Indigenous people occupied in the inner west of Sydney came to be known as 'The Block' and was formally established, after much political agitation from Indigenous leaders and non-Indigenous supporters, through a grant by the Whitlam federal government in 1972, and became known as the 'symbolic heart of (post)colonial political struggle' (McAuliff quoted in Anthony 2011: 393).

6. Triple J is a government-funded national radio station that caters to young audiences and alternative music.

Lisi from Goodna (Queensland), Real Deal Skeng from Cranbourne (south-east Melbourne), HP Boyz from Hampton Park (Melbourne) and CG Fez from western Sydney (Owens 2021). Yet British attitudes and views certainly shaped the way broader Australian society has viewed Hip Hop. In fact, the rejection of Hip Hop in mainstream Australian culture can be situated within a broader anti-American sentiment, a tradition inherited from British colonization. Indeed, the Australian editor of the landmark collection *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop outside the USA*, Tony Mitchell, describes

> a continuing lack of acceptance of Hip Hop in Australian mainstream culture [...] [which] perceives rap music and breakdancing as belonging to a violent, African-American-based youth subculture, and sees graffiti as a form of vandalism that needs to be eliminated from Australian cities. […] Hip Hop is seen as an outlaw culture that threatens mainstream values.
>
> (2011: 3)

And so, despite a strong presence of Australian practitioners from Indigenous, CaLD and Aussie Hip Hop communities since the early 1980s, it took until 2004 for Hip Hop to be recognized and added as a category to Australia's annual music awards by the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA). Much of this recognition, however, was limited to artists of the 'Aussie Hip Hop' group.

The early 2000s also saw renewed interest in breaking due to music videos of 'It's Like That' by Jason Nevins and Run-DMC (1997) and 'Freestyler' (1999) by Finnish Hip Hop group Bomfunk MC's as well as Hollywood films. At this time, some breakers turned away from Aussie rap, which was pushing the ethos of maintaining an Aussie accent and rejecting anyone with a slight American twang, who were predominantly Indigenous and CaLD rappers, 'there was a very big war between guys, using slight American twangs and being authentic with an Australian accent' (Red 2023: n.pag.). The more culturally inclusive breaking community in Australia, freed of the politics of language, was more about what you could 'throw down' in breaking – your skills and style. Consequently, there was more diversity across the breaking scene, with Australians of Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese, Indigenous and Anglo heritage, as well as a number of breakers from Asia and Europe on working holiday visas or migrating to Australia. The early 2000s saw a proliferation of breaking crews established around the country, many of which are still active today. Informal friendships with international breakers, and the previous generation of Australian breakers, helped this new generation develop their knowledge and practice (Lamaroc9 2022).

It is interesting to note that rather than dance to rap music, many of these breakers danced to break and funk beats. Nor did many Australian breakers of this generation identify with the narratives of US rap music or with the idiosyncrasies of Aussie Hip Hop, instead looking to the breakers of American and European breaking competitions, like Battle of the Year and Freestyle Session. Due to the geographic isolation of Australia, it became very important for event organizers to fly international breakers over to help elevate and inspire the scene. Many North American, European and later Asian breakers were flown over to judge competitions, teach workshops and even battle the local scene. Over the last two decades this included iconic breakers such as Ken Swift,

Alien Ness, Ruen, Frankie Flav, Juse Boogy, Venum, Ivan, Wicket, AsiaOne, AB Girl, Beta, Menno, AT, Jinjo Crew and Extreme Crew.[7] Some international breakers would even put Australian breakers down into their crew (i.e. they became part of the crew) or establish an Australian chapter, such as MZK and the Ladies Luv Hip Hop collective. This not only set up more formal lines of mentorship and opportunity, but also gave some Australian breakers an immediate level of international legitimization and 'rep' (Lamaroc9 2022: n.pag.). As breaking has become more embedded in the broader street dance scene, there has been more interaction and community building with styles that assert LGBTIQ+ empowerment (like waacking and voguing), leading to greater diversity and inclusivity on the dance floor (see further Gunn 2019). Unabated by xeno-racism and identity politics once prevalent within Aussie rap culture, breaking in Australia has quietly gone from strength to strength. Today, there is a growing body of literature on Australia's breaking and street dance scene (Marie 2018, 2020; Gunn 2016, 2022).

As rap music's popularity in mainstream Australian culture increased in the early 2010s, bonds started to form between previously distinct communities. Indigenous and CaLD Hip Hop artists began performing more regularly on national broadcaster Triple J radio and in music festivals around Australia. Changing dynamics of the music industry, such as the proliferation of social media, YouTube and access to home studio recording equipment, created opportunities for Indigenous and CaLD Australian Hip Hop to flourish. There was also more support by established popular Aussie Hip Hop acts and their respective independent record labels, like Hilltop Hoods from Adelaide and their label Golden Era Records, which supported Indigenous rapper Adam Briggs. Briggs has gone on to start his own Indigenous label Bad Apples, which is now responsible for supporting the music careers of a number of emerging Indigenous rappers, including Birdz, Nooky and Kobie Dee. There were also increased collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, blurring the boundaries between previously distinct scenes and fan bases. For example, Indigenous duo A.B. Original has collaborated with the late Indigenous singer–songwriter Gurrumul and non-Indigenous musicians Ben Hauptman and Michael Hohnen on a cover of Gurrumul's 'The Hunt' (2014), as well as on the track 'Dumb Things' (2016) with folk Australian icon Paul Kelly (John 2016).

These are merely a few examples of the many instances of increased collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists within and beyond Australian Hip Hop music. Apart from the national broadcaster, smaller local community radio stations, like Koori Radio in Redfern (Sydney) and 2KND in Melbourne have dedicated Hip Hop shows that promote local and national Indigenous Hip Hop as well as Black American, Native American and other Indigenous Hip Hop music from around the world. Fans and the broader community have become more accepting of the cultural and linguistic diversity now more audible in Australian Hip Hop, recognizing that it is reflective of a modern multicultural nation. This increased support and recognition was illustrated in the 2022 ARIA Awards, which was dominated not only by Hip Hop music, but by Indigenous Hip Hop and R&B artists The Kid LAROI (Best Pop release), BARKAA (Best Hip Hop/Rap release nominee), Budjerah (Best Soul/R&B release) and Baker Boy who took out the most ARIA's (Best Hip Hop/Rap release, Album of the year and Best Solo Artist) for his track and album with the same title 'Gela'. The future of Australia's Hip Hop cultures is looking better than ever before.

7. For example, Australian B-Boy Championships organized by Scot Doo Rok, Shadow Wars by Rush and Mason Rose, Platform Hip Hop Festival by Rely, She Got Game by Bgirl Stash and Destructive Steps by J-One and DSDA.

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Rachael Gunn is an interdisciplinary and practice-based researcher interested in the cultural politics of breaking and street dance. Also known in the breaking scene as 'Raygun', she was the Australian Breaking Association's top-ranked b-girl in 2020 and 2021, and represented Australia at the World Breaking Championships in Paris in 2021, and in Seoul in 2022. She holds a Ph.D. in cultural studies, and is a lecturer in the Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language, and Literature at Macquarie University (Sydney). Her work draws upon dance studies, cultural theory, popular music studies, ethnography and media studies, and has been published in journals such as *Continuum: Journal of Media and Culture*, *Feminist Media Studies* and *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture*. Other than battling in the b-girl or open breaking competitions, Gunn also emcees jams and organizes workshops, training sessions and events to help support women's growth in breaking.

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