

# Droppin' conscious beats and flows: Aboriginal hip hop and youth identity

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**Abstract:** *Hip hop culture is significant in Aboriginal youth identity formation. I examine the culture of 'conscious' Australian hip hop as practised by three hip hoppers from the East Coast: Little G and MC Wire, both Aboriginal, and Morganics, a Settler who conducts hip hop workshops for Aboriginal youth. In dispelling the myth of American cultural imperialism, I argue that hip hop's critical appropriation has as much to do with its internal logic of sampling, representin' and flow as with the oppositional politics it often serves as a vehicle.*

One morning last winter a bill poster plastered on a wall caught my attention. It advertised the Melbourne concert of hip hop's latest 'public enemy', the notorious American emcee, 50 cent,<sup>1</sup> a 'gangsta rapper' whose latest album has sold nine million copies worldwide. Given that 50 cent sells his records on the reputation that he is a drug-dealing, violent, womanising thug, who prides himself on having served time in gaol and on having been shot, it is no surprise that media commentators have called on the government not to allow him into Australia on the basis of his 'bad character' (Bolt 2003).

The furore surrounding 50 cent and other 'gangsta rappers' has elicited predictable reactions from the media. It is common for Australia's media to associate hip hop with crime and moral bankruptcy and identify it as an agent of American cultural imperialism.<sup>2</sup> With the spotlight firmly on the 'bad boy' image of 50 cent and his like, mainstream Australia overlooks Australian hip hop's 20-plus years as a flourishing underground youth culture.

Australian hip hop does not consist solely of 'wanna-be gangstas' mimicking 50 cent's 'thug life'. There is a diversity of hip hop forms lived and practised in Australia. I investigate one of its forms, the self-proclaimed 'conscious' hip hop scene,<sup>3</sup> because it is the form that is having a growing influence on Aboriginal youth.<sup>4</sup> This essay will focus on three Australian hip hoppers, their work, and the culture they inhabit and create: Little G and MC Wire (both Aboriginal) and Morganics (a Settler who conducts hip hop workshops with Aboriginal youth).<sup>5</sup> Beginning with a brief introduction to hip hop through an explication of its five major elements, I attribute hip hop's 'glocalisation' in Australia through what I term its 'internal logic' of *sampling, representin'* and *flow*. Having situated their culture in a wider framework, my engagement with these three key figures will be represented as a spatial narrative by presenting my research as changing scenes that map the locations, from pubs to school assemblies, where their hip hop is practised.

In conducting my research into hip hop, and more specifically Aboriginal hip hop, I confronted various

methodological issues. Firstly, as a participant in the local hip hop community I wanted to conduct and present my research in a manner that remains true to hip hop's values of 'keeping it real'. Secondly, I wanted to proceed with a constant awareness of the history of scholarly objectification of Aboriginal people and the appropriation of their knowledge. These ethical constraints led me to adopt a methodology that draws from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose methodology espouses a reflexive sociology.<sup>6</sup> As part of my responsibility as a researcher I took into account the values of the hip hoppers I interviewed as well as my own investments as both a scholar and a member of the hip hop community. The importance of addressing these ethical concerns lies in the fact that hip hop is a lived culture and produces its own theory, and thus the subject matter is inherently interesting in itself when it speaks for itself. Throughout this article I have endeavoured to share my research in a way that does not create a radical break between hanging with Morganics, MC Wire and Little G, and then writing about it.

### From New York—the five elements

Hip hop is more than just a style of music. It is a youth lifestyle which, from humble beginnings in the New York City borough of the Bronx in the early 1970s, has evolved into a cultural and economic phenomenon of global proportions. Hip hop is a culture that includes, but is not restricted to, what is commonly called 'rap music'. I will use the term 'hip hop' to refer to the practices and beliefs that make up the culture of the communities of people that participate in (or support) one or more of its five elements: deejaying, breakdancing, emceeing, beatboxing, and graffiti.<sup>7</sup>

- *Deejaying*: The deejay creates hip hop's music by playing the 'break' section of a record,<sup>8</sup> cutting from one 'break' to the next and matching the tempo to make a smooth transition, thus turning it into an instrumental the crowd can dance to or an emcee can rhyme to.
- *Breakdancing*: An immensely physical dancing style danced without a partner to hip hop music's heavy beats. Mitchell (1999:86) located breakdancing as part of hip hop's multicultural roots, derived from Puerto Rican dance steps and influenced by the Brazilian martial art of Capoeira.
- *Emceeing*: The method of vocal delivery of hip hop's lyrics is called emceeing, also known as rapping.<sup>9</sup> The art of emceeing (derived from 'master of

ceremonies', or MC), encompasses many styles of verbal delivery, from simple rhymes to more complex wordplays of meaning-dense mini-narratives. Attempting a written description of a vocal form is difficult, but Maxwell (1997:54) made a worthy attempt: emceeing is 'rhythmic, chanted poetry, often tuneful but not sung'. I would add that what distinguishes a rap from performance poetry is that the lyrics are skilfully delivered not only with reference to a melody, but also creatively around the beat.

- *Beatboxing*: The ease with which a person can create hip hop is one of the reasons behind its appeal. To produce hip hop music all a person requires is a good taste in records, two turntables to deejay, and a microphone to emcee. At hip hop music's most basic level, no equipment at all is required. A beatboxer is a human drum machine who creates a beat for an emcee to deliver their rap over and a breakdancer to dance to. Beatboxing is a significant element in hip hop culture because it makes hip hop accessible. Whereas performances of rock, jazz, blues or country all require multiple musical instruments, the beatboxer can create the beats to a hip hop track without having had any expensive music lessons in order to learn an equally expensive instrument, or any formal training.

Listening to or watching hip hop on TV, or a live performance, is enough for hip hop to be (re)produced. With beatboxing, hip hop music can be made anyplace, anytime. It is an element that is popular and much practised in Australian hip hop today, especially during live performances, yet is much neglected in Australian scholarly literature on hip hop.<sup>10</sup> Beatboxing has had little exposure in mainstream music because, along with graffiti, it can not be commercially exploited.

- *Graffiti*: Graffiti, or 'writing', consists of writing one's 'tag', the graffiti pseudonym, with a marker or spray paint, on a wall in a public space. Graffiti ranges from small and simple scribbles, to more elaborate and larger tags like the spray-painted murals adorning public walls and trains.

Unlike in the Bronx, where a combination of social vectors including poverty and racism organically spawned hip hop culture, hip hop's emergence in Australia was one of replication. Australian hip hoppers of the early 1980s reproduced the music, dancing, art and clothing coming out of the Bronx from songs they heard on the radio and video-clips they watched on television.<sup>11</sup> This spawned what

has become a thriving hip hop scene, growing and maintaining itself at the grassroots level, and surviving outside the music industry and big business by relying on strong local support. Staying chiefly 'underground', there are countless local deejays, emcees, beatboxers, breakdancers and graffiti artists throughout Australia.

## To Cape York: sampling, representin', and flow

Mitchell (1999:85–6) declared that 'recent manifestations in global rap music suggest it has gone well beyond the boundaries defined by "blackness"' since it 'has been increasingly appropriated, indigenised and re-territorialised all over the world'. He (1999:87) identified hybridity and multicultural diasporic flows as the reasons for hip hop's global localisation, 'globalisation', suggesting that 'it is a form that can be adopted or adapted to express the concerns of ethnic minorities everywhere'.

Australian hip hop took root in working class and underprivileged areas of both urban and rural Australia, in Aboriginal, ethnic and working class areas 'whose youth were attracted by the racially oppositional features of African American hip hop and adopted its signs and forms as markers of their own otherness' (Mitchell 1999:88). As Kurt Iveson (1997:41) argued, mainstream Australian music did not address their experiences of racism and disadvantage and many found in hip hop a culture that attended to those needs:

In hip hop they found a culture which has the means to fight back against the experiences of racism, and other elements of the culture like graffiti and hip hop style provide the means to make space in segregated Australian cities for cultural production.<sup>12</sup>

It needs to be stressed, however, that the continued growth of hip hop in Australia, over 20 or more years, is due to more than hip hop being a medium for oppositional politics. Extending Mitchell's discussion of the localisation of global hip hop through hybridity and diasporic flows, I want to attribute hip hop's appeal, and its subsequent growth from New York across the world (and ultimately to outback Australia), to what I term its 'internal logic' of *sampling*, *representin'* and *flow*, three characteristics common across all hip hop's manifestations that make it highly adaptable and give a transnational form its local roots and flavour.

*Sampling*, the word used to describe hip hop's artistic appropriation, is at the heart of its musical technique. Hip hop music is a postmodern bricolage of pre-recorded sounds, a music of hybridity. Bricolage, building something out of fragments, creatively combining bits and pieces to reference or transform or subvert their original use, is an apt term to describe the method of sampling. Deejays 'sample' various records and have at their disposal the whole history of pre-recorded sounds: songs, advertising jingles or TV theme songs, even speeches by politicians. In this way the deejay samples many sounds to create a new soundtrack, simultaneously highlighting as well eroding the modernist division between original and copy.

Houston Baker (1993:89) defined hip hop's sampling technique as 'the non-authoritative collaging or archiving of sound and style that bespeaks a deconstructive hybridity. Linearity and progress yield to a dizzying synchronicity'. Sampling, with its hybrid nature, allows hip hop to transgress national boundaries and yet maintain a localised flavour. Along with the emcee's use of local idioms and slang, sampling localises this global phenomenon both in space and in time. It is the hybridity inherent in hip hop's internal logic that allows for a coexistence of the local and the global, tradition and modernity.

While postmodernism is an appropriate theoretical framework with which to understand the hip hop music's hybridity, hip hop culture's characteristic of *representin'* is strongly modernist in form. Global hip hop culture is 'almost always about the celebration of roots in place, neighbourhood, home, family and nation' (Mitchell 1999:86). Hip hop's characteristic of *representin'* is its measure of authenticity. To represent is to remain true to one's community and to the ideals of the hip hop culture one belongs to. A hip hopper's identity is partially defined by *representin'* 'where you're from'. A famous example is the title of seminal American hip hop group NWA's 1988 multi-platinum album *Straight outta Compton*. NWA claimed their hip hop authenticity by *representin'* their neighbourhood, Compton, a 'ghetto' suburb of LA. Being part of the hip hop culture implies not only being rooted in the local, but also standing up for it by *representin'* it. Subsequently, the hip hop expression 'keep it real' refers to the importance in hip hop of *representin'* as a criterion of authenticity, where representing one's locality by being part of the culture is paramount.

The hip hop term *flow*, as part of hip hop's vernacular, is an elusive concept: it is an attitude, a

value judgement on style, and a term of inclusion and exclusion to hip hop culture. At its origins, to have flow is to be able to emcee skilfully to the beat. Dr Dre's rhyme (from NWA's hip hop track 'Express yourself') is applying a value judgement to a fellow emcee's style of rapping:

Express yourself  
From the heart.  
Cause if you wanna start to move up the chart  
Then expression is a big part of it.  
You ain't efficient when you flow  
You ain't swift, movin' like a tortoise  
Full of rigor mortis.

The ability to identify a skilful emcee is in itself a demonstration of flow. This demonstration exhibits an understanding of the values and styles of the local hip hop community, creating a sense of belonging and identity that forms the basis of representin'. Just as representin' isn't confined exclusively to the rap, flow extends to a range of attitudes and styles that comprise hip hop culture. Although there may be global flows, flow is defined locally. The knowledge of the local that is necessary for a hip hopper to embody flow creates the criteria for the inclusion and exclusion. This defines the Australian hip hop scenes and has insulated them against commercial appropriation. While a person may be able to buy themselves hip hop chart popularity, they can not buy their way into a hip hop community because hip hop exists in representin' and flow.

### **Hanging out with Little G, the 'Wogarigine'**

With the mic in one hand and her body dancing to the bassy rhythm of the hip hop beat, emcee Little G pauses to smile at the crowd, then continues with the next verse of her rhyme:

If you miss-communicate  
Violate  
Dictate  
I illuminate and illustrate  
The truth I don't complicate  
I cover quite controversial topics  
And if the world was a ball  
I'd definitely rock it.

The Evelyn's band room is filled with a hundred or so people. Some stand facing the stage and nod their heads in time to the beat, others are having

a drink at the bar and talking with friends, and a dozen or so are by the stage dancing to the music. The Evelyn is an 'alternative' pub, neither too trendy nor too dirty, that attracts a diverse range of people: hippies, trendies, students from the inner suburbs, Indigenous Australians, as well as people with immigrant backgrounds from Melbourne's north. Everyone is mingling and having a drink as they watch Little G perform.

Georgina Chrisanthopoulos acquired the stage name 'Little G' because of her short stature. She is a 23-year-old female Greek-Australian/Aboriginal emcee, a self-professed 'Wogarigine', originally from the northern Victorian town of Mildura, and now residing in Melbourne's west. A few weeks before her performance at the Evelyn I interviewed Little G. Seated at a table overlooking a lane in Melbourne's CBD, and to the backing of ambient music and crashing plates in the café's kitchen, the conversation begins with how Little G's entry into hip hop occurred simultaneously with her desire to learn about her Aboriginal heritage (2003):

I was kind of ashamed of it, you know, the stereotypes and stuff. 'Nah, I'm not Aboriginal, I'm Spanish, Greek, this and that. Nah, what am I? Um, Aboriginal.' After learning about the massacres and the history of it all I was like, 'Shit. What am I ashamed for? Shouldn't I be more proud of who I am?' And from that time on, it's only about six years now that I've come to terms with it, but it's hard to sort of, in this society, as a young Indigenous person growing up, going, 'I'm proud to be Aboriginal'.

'Yorta Yorta', the first rap Little G wrote, was written in response to her growing identification with Aboriginal culture:

I come from the clan of the Yorta Yorta nation  
And I let the people know that I am a fascination  
To know who I am  
To believe who I am  
I respect the Elder people of the Yorta Yorta nation  
Hey, I'll never feel alone  
I'll never feel disgraced  
Coz this is my home  
This is my place  
A race they'll have to face  
Stamp your feet and feel the beat  
A spiritual feeling of a cultural beat  
I scream it loud and I say it proud  
I'm from the tribe of a dancing crowd.

'Yorta Yorta' is an expression of Little G's newfound Aboriginal pride, a pride she conveyed in rhyme because its articulation helped her to understand and form her Aboriginal identity.<sup>13</sup> Little G explains (2003):

I love the power of expressing the lyrics through word. You can sing a song, or you can play an instrument, but with hip hop it's like speaking, it's spoken word. It's the flow to it, it's the style, of enjoying it. It's powerful. It definitely gives me strength just to stand up there ... Hip hop is like freedom of speech, it's a voice for the younger generation, for the future. With the hip hop music I sort of wanna teach the younger Indigenous kids, if they have that sort of thing about not wanting to learn, not wanting to be proud of who they are, through my music I want to say, 'We do have a beauty. Be proud of it. Hold onto it.'

The process of embracing her Aboriginal identity was not an easy one for Little G. It was not a 'new age' reawakening, nor just a case of learning some traditional Aboriginal customs, but a complex process of discovering and embracing ideas that she had distanced herself from as a child. While she may perform with a smile, many of her tracks are motivated by the anger she feels about the treatment of Aboriginals in the past and today, by both Settlers and Aboriginal people in contemporary politics. She tells me, 'Most of my music has a political content. I've got a lot of anger to get out for my people and through music, that's the way to go' (2003). Yet Little G did not set out to produce overtly political, or necessarily 'Aboriginal', hip hop. She explains (2003):

When I started out, I never had any idea of being political or anything. I just wanted to rap and write rhymes, and do music. And then people have that expectation of Indigenous raps [that they must be political]. 'Yorta Yorta', for some reason, it made everything political. In a way it pushed me in the way of doing the political raps because I was the only one person, female and Indigenous ... I had a lot of pressure on me to go this way. But now I don't think of it, I write these rhymes and they go in this direction. With the songs that I write, the first one's 'Yorta Yorta', being proud of who I am. The second one is 'Black Deaths in Custody', about a friend of mine who lost a son in gaol, and so on. It continues, it's like a story in itself, each song, my experiences in life, the things I learnt. So the songs are all sort of truthful.

Little G's words establish that her influences are primarily Australian. Her adoption of the hip hop

musical style is not an attempt to imitate an American style and adopt African American politics, but it is a critical appropriation. Like a growing number of Aboriginal youth, Little G chose hip hop to help negotiate her Aboriginality, to discuss her concerns and local politics, embodying 'conscious' hip hop's spirit of artistic and performative self-expression that is educational and ultimately enjoyable.

### **'Any colour fella can get into this groove': MC Wire and Morganics**

I arrived at Redfern Station about 15 minutes early and found a spot out of the rain to stand while I waited for Morganics. Directly across the street, on the wall above the train lines, was a faded mural painted with Aboriginal designs. After a few minutes Morganics pulls up in his car. Morganics, a.k.a. Morgan Lewis, a Settler hip hopper, is a well-respected member of the Australian hip hop community, being an ex-member of one of Australia's seminal but now defunct hip hop groups, MetaBass n Breath. He now performs solo and conducts hip hop workshops that teach mainly Aboriginal youth to breakdance, beatbox and emcee. Will Jarrett, a.k.a. MC Wire, an Aboriginal emcee, beatboxer and breakdancer from the north coast of New South Wales and now living in Sydney, works with Morganics conducting these workshops. I only realise he has been standing beside me in his poncho as he gets into the car behind me. After some quick and quite casual introductions we begin driving to Alexandria Street Community School, where Morganics and MC Wire will give a hip hop performance as part of the school's NAIDOC week celebrations.

With a round of applause Morganics and MC Wire take the mic and introduce themselves, telling the students that they have come to share some hip hop skills:

Morganics: 'Who here likes hip hop?'

Some students put their hand up while a few call out, 'Me!'

Morganics: 'No! In hip hop you don't put your hand up. Lesson number one in hip hop today is you make a lot of noise, ok?' He calls out, 'Who here likes hip hop?'

The students scream, 'Yeah!'

The performance begins with a video-clip, 'All You Mob'. It is a track that MC Wire and Morganics produced during their trips to conduct workshops at various Aboriginal communities in remote Australia.

It features Aboriginal children playing and making faces, something the students enjoy and they laugh. On the screen flash images of central and northern Australia, interspersed with Aboriginal youth practising hip hop. To these images Morganics and MC Wire deliver their rhymes:

Together:

All you mob get into this  
All you mob you get into this.

Morganics:

From Bondi to Punchbowl  
Maningrida to Yirrkala  
Everybody feel this  
Reveal this  
I deal this  
Straight from the heart  
That's where I start  
Everybody's got the right  
Everybody feels alright  
So everybody  
Get up and party  
And any humbug  
We're gonna breakdown  
So from the NT back to the city of Sydney  
Are you with me?  
YEAH!  
Indonesian, Australian, Timorese  
Or whatever you be  
Papua New Guinean Nunga Murri to Koori  
Brothers and sisters overseas  
Maori, Japanese  
All the way back to the NYC  
We give respect to the founders  
Who found this culture of  
Hip hop!  
So we never stop  
Like Acka Dacka we rock  
In our own lingo  
True blue  
Aha, like a rainbow  
Come on!

MC Wire:

Black, yellow, red  
White and blue  
Any colour fella can get into this groove  
Elevating race relations  
Taking it to the next level  
With the beat, bass and the treble  
We're all created different  
We're all created equal.

...

MC Wire

From Bangaree

Asking all you mob to get down with me.

I've been asked by Morganics to video-record the performance and I can't help but focus on the students who are really getting into it, waving their arms up and down in hip hop style or miming words to the music. Three students in their early teens also get up on stage and breakdance with MC Wire and Morganics. While many students professed to being avid fans of hip hop, for some this performance was their first time watching *live* hip hop, and through their rhymes Morganics and MC Wire call on all the students to embrace it. They speak to the students' cultural diversity, introducing them to 'conscious' hip hop's social philosophy, promoting unity through diversity, hip hop style, and the celebration of one's roots.

We chose a café around the corner from the school, and sitting at the stools by the window overlooking the streets of Redfern we started to talk about their lives in hip hop. Drinking their coffees and flicking through the newspaper that was left on the counter, Morganics and MC Wire speak quite candidly and at length about their experiences with hip hop culture in Australia. A comment about how positive a movement hip hop is becoming here elicits the following reply from MC Wire (2003):

Hip hop affects us in a good and a bad. Good in that it gives us an avenue to express, to write, to dance, to create. In a bad sense we're getting fed a lot of hip hop bullshit, Jah Rules and this sort of crap. A lot of the younger generation today in Aboriginal communities who don't know where hip hop originates from, in the essence of what it's about, think it's all about Bling Bling, fast cars, girls with fucking big tits, and all this shit.

Morganics continues (2003):

I think this morning is an example of what's good. It's a medium, it's a form where everyone, intergenerational can connect to a degree. It's important for them to know the alternatives, more than just what they're fed by the mass media ... You go out to totally isolated remote Aboriginal communities out in Arnhem Land or something and there'll be bit of graffiti 'I love Dr. Dre', 'I love Eminem, Snoop Dog', stuff like that, in a place where there's 300 people.

Echoing the popular criticism of American cultural imperialism, I ask for their thoughts. MC Wire's









