

## **“I Rep for My Mob”**

Blackfellas Rappin’ from Down-Unda<sup>1</sup>

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In an era of decentering globalizing forces that continuously shift the locale of cultural production and consumption from global markets to local realities and vice versa, music has come to play a crucial role in redefining the value of regional discourses. Hip hop music,<sup>2</sup> with its long and solid history of indigenization in different parts of the globe, has provided marginalized and stigmatized communities around the world with accessible “artistic tools” of self-expression. Tony Mitchell (2001), Samy H. Alim, Awad and Pennycook (2009), Sujatha Fernandes (2011) and more recently Christopher Malone and George Martinez (2014), amongst others, have explored the multifaceted and compelling expressivity of “glocal” discourses articulated through hip hop. Many are the local stories of struggle and empowerment that have gained global recognition thanks to the new media. Recent emblematic cases of this movement from the local to the global are well represented by three distinct and yet interrelated cases that testify the power of hip hop as an amplifier for unique stories.

The first example is that Sonita Alizadeh, a young Afghani girl who used her personal experience to convey a message of dissent against the issue of child marriage with a hip hop track called “Brides for Sale” (2014). In a similar fashion, with the track “Kodaikanal Won’t” (2015) a young Indian Tamil woman, Sofia Ashraf, launched her protest against the pollution of Kodaikanal (India) caused by the multinational company Unilever. Fitting into a similar “template,” Kylie Sambo, a young Indigenous activist from Australia’s Northern Territory, released the track “Muckaty” (2010),<sup>3</sup> where she lamented the Australian government’s decision to create a nuclear waste dump on Indigenous land. Thanks to the visibility acquired on the social media, Sambo was invited to several events to raise awareness about the issue.

Sharing a view of hip hop as a vehicle of social change, these three “improvised’ hip hop artists have gained notoriety across the Internet, and their stories have mobilized public opinion within and outside their respective countries of origin. Like them, many other artists have productively experimented with new technologies to reach international audiences, despite the particularities of their messages. In Australia, a significant number of Indigenous youth have found in hip hop an adaptable framework for the articulation of narratives grounded in the locale of their place of origin, but often projected towards international publics. Transnational connections are thus enhanced by the systematic use of new media, the strategic adoption of the American accent and Indigenous artists’ frequent collaborations with American rappers (see Minestrelli 2014; 2016). Reflecting on these spatial trajectories (both virtual and real), and with a focus on the relationship between Indigenous hip hop artists and their surrounding urban environments, this chapter investigates the discursive techniques adopted by some prolific Australian Indigenous rappers in their negotiation of notions of place and cultural values in tension with the colonial history<sup>4</sup> of the country. In this regard, I have engaged with the artists’ global views and local discourses by examining their music and testimonies. The material collected from secondary sources, participant observation<sup>5</sup> and thematic analysis of music allowed for an understanding of issues pertaining to identity and attachment to place as expressed by Yorta Yorta rappers Briggs and Darah, who are both from Shepparton, a country town in north-eastern Victoria, as well as Larrakia MC Jimblah,<sup>6</sup> who lives in Adelaide, South Australia. Even though these artists’ music fulfills several communicative and entertaining purposes, it is their counter-hegemonic narrative of resistance and place that is of interest here, for it conveys the rappers’ deepest feelings.

## **Twenty-First Century “Aboriginal Style” in the City**

Since its beginnings in the 1980s, hip hop in Australia immediately found fertile ground amongst disadvantaged strata of the population. In particular, the language of hip hop appealed to those youths who were struggling to assert their presence within urban contexts. Second-generation immigrants<sup>7</sup> and Australian Indigenous people were very receptive to the influences coming from the USA, as they could relate to the messages of stigmatized groups from other parts of the world. Yet, even though Indigenous people had been actively involved in hip hop since its inception in Australia, their presence was often relegated to the margins of the so-called “Australian hip hop community,” gaining public recognition and access to mainstream music channels only over the last ten years. Thanks to experienced and currently active artists such as The Last Kinection, Street Warriors, A.B. Original (Briggs and Trials) Jimblah, Impossible Odds and Yung Warriors, who have made a name for themselves within the national and international music industry, Indigenous hip hop has witnessed a greater exposure to avenues once exclusively dominated by Anglo-Australian voices. Such a change within the Australian cultural landscape is clearly suggested by the 2017 Triple J Hottest 100,<sup>8</sup> which saw for the first time an Indigenous hip hop group—A.B. Original in this case—securing a position within the top twenty songs in one of the most popular charts in Australia. This result is even more significant considering the title and content of the single, “January 26” (A.B. Original 2016), which addresses political themes with an overtly polemical tone.

Yorta Yorta rapper Briggs, who gained a privileged position within the Australian music industry thanks to his talent and the strategic branding of his artistic persona as “detached” from the politics of identity, later in his career embraced political tones by branding his public figure and music as overtly “Indigenous.” This is further evidenced by his collaboration with Trials for the album *Reclaim Australia* (2016). Indeed, in an interview for *The Age*, Briggs declared:

“There is a time for a message . . . now I’ve infiltrated [into the ‘Australian hip hop community’] as far as I have I’m saying, all you younger [black] rappers you can be here, too . . . rap music and success isn’t just for white fellas”

(Vincent 2015)

The rapper’s statement, as well as his personal story, voice unspoken racial politics within the Australian music industry, and reiterate the idea that the only way for Indigenous people to succeed in (Australian) society is by “infiltrating” its most exclusive socio-cultural contexts. Strategic performances of “passing” (as non-Indigenous) have characterized the history of how most “racialized bodies” could gain recognition within predominantly “White” and patriarchal socio-political configurations, and music is no exception.<sup>9</sup>

Indigenous rappers have thus proved that, beyond sheer purposes of entertainment, hip hop music also functions as a vehicle for ideological representations aiming to disrupt conventional portrayals of “Indigeneity.” In this regard, social media have been playing an important role in diffusing the stories of these artists. The Facebook pages *Australian Aboriginal Hip Hop* (2017), later named *Indij Hip Hop Show* (2017), as well as the YouTube channel *AboriginalRap* (2017), have further reinforced the creation of symbolic sites for the negotiation and promotion of transnational dialogues between international users with similar experiences. The accessibility of these digital platforms and the opportunity to start a virtual communication between geographically disconnected music lovers is in fact a new dimension to consider in relation to the promotion and distribution of music through non-conventional channels.

By embracing hip hop, Indigenous artists from the most disparate walks of life and areas of Australia have found a productive way to articulate the challenges of being Indigenous in the twenty-first century, defying prejudices on race, gender and culture. The

album *Against All Odds* (2011a) by Brisbane-based hip hop group Impossible Odds clearly exemplifies this attitude through tracks like “Identity,” “Soul of the Troubadour,” “Take this Message” and “What Do You See.” These songs represent different stories of discrimination through stereotyping, marginalization, personal and collective struggles. Fred Leone, also known as Rival MC, the voice of the band, explains that “mainstream media . . . only want to portray Murris as a black man in the bush, painted up, they don’t acknowledge that we come in all colours” (Ward 2013). Nevertheless, as Rival MC has demonstrated throughout his successful career as a musician, producer, manager and mentor, these songs are also testimonies of positive outcomes through music, where Rap provides a means of channeling negative feelings, towards healing.

With hip hop as their preferred tool of communication, between the received knowledge of their Elders<sup>10</sup> and the aesthetics of modernity, many Indigenous rappers have created discursive spaces within what I have called “the Indigenous counter-public sphere” (see Minestrelli 2014, 2016), the Australian public sphere and beyond.<sup>11</sup> Researching Indigenous cultural performances in the global and globalized context of (Indigenous) cultural festivals, Peter Phipps (2010) argues that “[t]he emergence of a global ‘indigenous’ identity enables (and is symptomatic of) a reordering of the ‘national’ in the cultural sphere” (219). Phipps’s assertion is relevant here, as it points to a growing “global indigenesness” (220) that exceeds the boundaries of locality through the politicization of a “pan-Aboriginal” identity. Hip hop, as both a domain of the Indigenous counterpublic sphere and a pan-Aboriginal movement, as I have mentioned in the introduction to this chapter and argued in depth elsewhere (Minestrelli 2014, 2016), has helped Indigenous rappers spread local messages to wider international audiences through social media. In fact, the underlying political vein of most Indigenous hip hop acts has mostly constituted a hindrance to achieving mainstream airplay within a profit-driven music industry that caters for the market’s trends. Thus, Briggs’

case clearly reflects this situation and the challenges of meeting the demands of a prevailing “White” hip hop consumer base (see Arthur and Quester 2006).

Indigenous hip hop artists have been actively participating in public debates by using their music to engage with the Australian government’s political agenda in relation to Indigenous, national and international affairs. During the 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the global ferment around civil and human rights, Indigenous people from some of the biggest Australian cities took a strong stance against the inequalities they had to face and voiced some of their concerns also through music genres such as rock and reggae (see Connell and Gibson 2004; Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004; Minestrelli 2014). Today, hip hop has taken that place through the many releases that tackle some of the most cogent local and global questions, ranging from the discrimination of Australian Indigenous people, to issues of global resonance. These discussions are clearly exemplified by A.B. Original’s album *Reclaim Australia* (2016), Jimblah and Nooky’s track “Treaty 2015,” a hip hop rendition of Yothu Yindi’s iconic protest song “Treaty” (1991), as well as Briggs and Dewayne Everettsmith “The Children Came Back” (2015), a remake of Archie Roach’s classic song “Took the Children Away” (1990). Released on the occasion of the celebrations for the 2015 edition of NAIDOC Week (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee), “The Children Came Back” is a clear demonstration of how Indigenous rappers actively engage with current social issues. The song’s lyrics are a tribute to the dramatic history of child removal across Australia,<sup>12</sup> and the video clip, which is set in the Fitzroy Gardens in Melbourne, acknowledges past and present Indigenous heroes and leaders.

Nestled within this narrative of remembrance is a critique of current social debates related to acts of racism in Australia. In fact, Briggs is also using his song to tell a story of racial abuse against an Aboriginal child who was verbally attacked during a Disney event in country Victoria.<sup>13</sup> When the accident was made public, Briggs decided to have the child

star in his latest video, declaring: “[t]his is a history lesson, a monologue, a celebration and an education in one song” (Booth 2015). The Shepparton rapper, who commemorates his predecessors in his lyrics, also addresses Australia’s former Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2013–2015) by rapping: “Now Mr. Abbott, think about it / Me and you we feel the same / That might sound strange / I’m just saying / We both unsettled when the boats came” (Briggs 2015). Briggs’ ingenious pun creates an ironic effect based on the fact that he shares the same feelings as the former Prime Minister, a controversial politician known for his conservative views and politics of exclusion. However, while the term “boats” is invested with a colonial meaning from Briggs’ Indigenous perspective, Abbott’s apprehension is directed at the refugee boats,<sup>14</sup> thus addressing both a national and global current issue. The passage from personal to public realm is further suggested by a shift from first and second person singular pronouns to the use of an inclusive “we,” which stands for the Aboriginal population and, at the same time, the government. They both have similar feelings, but different concerns.

### **“Urban Blackfellas”: Unsettling Categories**

Indigenous hip hop artists are thus prolifically utilizing the medium of hip hop to participate in discussions on national affairs, continuing their Elders’ legacy to speak out against injustices. Kabi Kabi rapper Weno from The Last Kinection confirms this view stating:

you talk to our Elders and they talk about how the young fellas have got to take up the battle, I guess, take up the fight and, I guess, this is kinda of our development, this is where we are at”

(Local Knowledge 2003)

As Indigenous cultures in Australia have adapted to a changing geographical and socio-political landscape, they have also sought viable ways to articulate their identity as active local and global citizens. Indigenous people have been doing so through “strategies of cultural ‘survivance’” (see Vizenor 1999)<sup>15</sup> and by dismantling stereotypes that confine “Indigeneity” to the realm of “tradition.” In this sense, the performance of Indigenous “songlines” through the hip hop vernacular has allowed Indigenous people to further demonstrate their culture’s vitality in many ways, beyond political activism. As a by-product of modern technologies, this type of “Indigenous modernity,” or “digital modernity” is certainly a characteristic of “mutually contaminated times” (Lyons 2010, xi), yet this is not an isolated occurrence, as it is placed along a trajectory of consolidated practices, whereby the new generations of Indigenous musicians create original soundscapes rooted in the knowledge and experiences of their predecessors.

It is in this context that we need to understand the relationship Indigenous rappers have with place, which is depicted as both symbolic and lived space. For most rappers, the lived space is often represented by a city or town, whereas the Outback assumes the contours of the symbolic. Cities are frequently described as places of exile, dispersal from the community of origin, but also as productive loci. A problematic view of the city is expressed by Darah in the track “City on Fire,” where the rapper from Shepparton raps: “Burn down cities, slums, commissions and prisons / Burn down mansions where rich folk living” (Darah 2012). These lines, like the rest of the song, put an emphasis on the socio-economic degradation experienced by lower-class city dwellers, where class often coalesces with “racial stigma.” The image conveyed through Darah’s lyrics is also part of a greater discourse rooted in Australia’s history of colonialism and the ensuing displacement of Indigenous people who were forced to move into urban areas as a result of genocide and assimilationist policies.



Such a critical view of cities is reinforced in the track “Straight Outta Shepparton” (South Side Kings 2012), a rendition of the notorious track “Straight Outta Compton” (1988) by the Los Angeles gangster Rap icons N.W.A. The song, which is produced by Darah and performed by Big Luke, Morgie Morgz, Sel, T.R. and Young AK pushes and exaggerates the semantic field generated by the simile, where Shepparton (VIC) is associated to Compton, a Californian municipality rendered (in)famous by N.W.A. for its sweeping poverty and high rates of crime. Although the track is celebratory of the Indigenous rappers’ street credibility, the comparison provides a clue about perceptions of their locale. In this particular instance, credibility can be seen in relation to hip hop, with its inscribed “street code” (see McLeod 1999). It can also represent a claim of an Indigenous identity that does not need to be justified by a rural and remote geographical location in the north of Australia. It is also for this reason that in “Aboriginal Style” Darah raps: “Where you from? / South Side / What you gonna do? / Hold it down,” thus reinforcing understandings of “urban indigeneity” as ideological and implicitly questioning notions of authenticity as defined by imposed parameters of “remoteness” and “skin color.”

The geo-(political and cultural) distinction between the north of Australia, where Aboriginal cultural practices have been less affected by the settlers’ culture, and the more urbanized south, is also reflected in Richard Broome’s (2010) articulation of “urban Aboriginality” along the lines of: “cultural maintenance; a sense of injustice; the acting out of a sometimes- negative oppositional culture; and the rebuilding of a positive Aboriginal identity” (188). In the southern parts of the country, where the colonial process left a deeper mark on the local Indigenous populations, the survival strategies adopted by these peoples demonstrate their ability to change and acquire new traits in order to keep certain traditions alive: “I’m from the south side, never been afraid” (Darah 2011). Today, hip hop has inspired

young Indigenous people to re-engage with their culture in new ways, utilizing the most accessible and productive means at their disposal. For Indigenous people living in urban areas, the sense of “Aboriginality” is maintained and, in some cases, restored through a series of cultural practices (kinship relations extended out of the immediate family circle, gatherings and community events) that endeavor to assert their presence, their identity, their pride and their rights within cityscapes (see Barwick 1988 and Behrendt 1995).

Larrakia<sup>16</sup> rapper Jimblah espouses this view in his celebration of the city where he lives and works. According to Jimblah, the city, in his case Adelaide (South Australia), is a tough reality, but it is also the place where he can find some peace: “Whenever I rest my head, / I’ve got a place to call home, / it’s my city” (Jimblah 2012). Adelaide thus becomes a less hostile place in Jimblah’s verses and acquires a new liveable dimension. Similar to Jimblah, but sharing the same place of origin as Darah, Briggs celebrates his hometown in the album *Sheplife* (2014), where he depicts Shepparton through his double bond of love for family and friends and aversion for the town’s parochial mentality. The different representations of the city as provided by Darah, Jimblah and Briggs are diverse, and yet complementary. Their worlds represent the “local,” with its mechanisms, institutions and the socio-economic dynamics that reflect large-scale phenomena. But the local is not destined to remain silent, as more and more Indigenous rappers utilize social media to their advantage. Either sparking controversial comments or praises, A.B. Original’s YouTube video clips, for instance, attract comments not only from Australian, but also from a wide variety of international viewers. The dialogic exchange facilitated by the global template of hip hop music, together with the affinities that emerge through this dialogue, help reduce the distance amongst various “localities,” fusing once more the local with the global.

## Conclusion

Within the cityscape of Australian urban centers, hip hop has provided Indigenous youth with a productive tool of self-expression and, in some cases, of political activism. This way this phenomenon can be read as a complex set of forces, needs and aspirations that all operate and cooperate at a personal and group level, shifting across the boundaries imposed by identification processes. The local reality of Australian Indigenous hip hop, with its struggle over visibility, recognition and access to the Australian public sphere, has gradually encouraged a cross-cultural debate where specific local practices are fostered and re-shaped by different urban geographies. Localized forms of knowledge with their counter-hegemonic discourses are also produced in small centers like Shepparton, which are thus invested with new cultural power.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The colloquial term “Blackfella” (Australian English) is composed of “black” and “fellow” and refers to Aboriginal Australians. The expression appears with great frequency in the lyrics of most Indigenous rappers. *Blackfellas* is also the title of a 1993 Australian film directed by James Ricketson. In contrast, the compound “Whitefella” (“white” and “fellow”) is often used by Indigenous people to identify non-Indigenous people. In the 1980s, the Indigenous group Warumpi Band released a song called “Blackfella/Whitefella” (1985). “Down-Unda” is an alternative spelling for the term “Down Under” which is colloquially used to describe Australia (see the Introduction of this book).
- <sup>2</sup> By hip hop, I refer to a cultural movement traditionally identifiable through its four core elements (rapping, djing, breakdancing and graffiti writing). Over the years,

notorious hip hop pioneers and artists have added other elements (street knowledge, beatboxing, street fashion, street language, street entrepreneurialism) to the “foundational ones.” Hip hop music, or rap, refers to one of the artistic forms of the phenomenon, namely the combination of music and lyrics.

- 3 Sonita Alizadeh’s “Brides for Sale,” Sofia Ashraf’s “Kodaikanal Won’t,” a politicized rendition of Nicki Minaj’s “Anaconda,” and Kyle Sambo’s “Muckaty” are available on YouTube. There are no official recordings of these tracks, apart from those found on the Internet.
- 4 Australia’s history of colonization with its political assimilationist legacy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the ensuing removal of many Indigenous children from their families is at the root of forms of collective trauma, which is handed down from generation to generation.
- 5 This chapter stems from four years of doctoral research in Australia (from 2010 until 2014). It is thus part of a larger study (see Minestrelli 2016). Part of the data collected during fieldwork has been used in this chapter to corroborate some of my arguments.
- 6 James Alberts, Jimblah, is a Larrakia rapper from the Northern Territory, who grew up and currently resides in Adelaide. Darah and Briggs are Yorta Yorta rappers from Shepparton (VIC). This chapter will also incorporate testimonies from other artists, such as The Last Kinection, a band from Newcastle (NSW) formed by Kabi Kabi siblings Joel, “Weno,” Wenitong, and Naomi, “Nay,” Wenitong and Jacob Turner, DJ Jaytee. Nathan Bird, known as Birdz, is an artist of Butchulla and Nguburinji and Scottish and English heritage from Katherine (NT). Brisbane-based Rival MC, is a Murri man of Tongan and South-Sea Islander heritage, as well as Garrawa, Waanyi and Butchulla, he is the voice of the group Impossible Odds. Street Warriors are two

brothers of Gamilaroi, Anaiwan and Dungutti background who, like The Last Kinection, live in Newcastle (NSW).

- 7 See for instance Tony Mitchell's (1998, 110) classification of various micro-communities of practice ("Falafel," "Wog" and "Ocker" hip hop) that reflect that cultural fragmentation of Australia.
- 8 The Triple J Hottest 100 is a public event hosted every year on Australia Day (January 26) by Radio Triple J, where the public is asked to vote for their favorite songs.
- 9 I am not using the word "society" here, as most societies are highly "multicultural." What I am referring to are governments, their constitutions and the bodies and institutions aiming to maintain dominant values and a status of inequality.
- 10 An Elder is a person who has gained respect in his/her community and who is highly regarded. Elders retain a great knowledge and provide guidance. The notion of Eldership varies according to the community, but it retains the above-mentioned common traits.
- 11 The "Indigenous counter-public sphere" combines Nancy Fraser's (1992) concept of "subaltern counter- publics" and Hartley and McKee's (2000) discourse on the "Indigenous public sphere."
- 12 The removals occurred roughly from 1869 to 1969 and probably during the 1970s.
- 13 In May 2015, a three-year-old Aboriginal girl was verbally assaulted in a racially motivated attack while she was lining up to attend *Frozen*, a Disney show which was taking place at a shopping center in country Victoria.
- 14 Tony Abbott's politics in relation to asylum seekers and refugees is manifest in his mantra: "Stop the boats!" In practical terms, his government's policy was to detain refugees, take them to offshore centers and relocate them somewhere else.

- 15 “Survivance” is a linguistic amalgam between “survival” and “resistance.” It was coined by *Anishinaabe*-scholar Gerald Vizenor (1999).
- 16 *Larrakia* is the name of the Indigenous community from around Darwin in the Northern Territory.
- 17 Local Knowledge has a double meaning here. In fact, beyond its literal meaning, it also refers to the name of an ous hip hop group from Newcastle (NSW).

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