Indigeneity and the City:
Australian Indigenous Youth and their Strategies of Cultural Survival through Hip Hop

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This essay explores issues of Indigenous resilience in the city. Primarily I am looking at the ways in which young Indigenous people's discourses—understood in a Foucauldian perspective—can be inscribed into wider discussions on cultural continuity across the generations. In particular, I will examine how Indigenous youth in south-eastern and eastern Australia make sense of their surrounding reality through rap music. In what way are young Indigenous rap artists who live in urban areas reshaping the socio-cultural geography of Australian society and its sustainability? The Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987) has defined sustainability as that 'practice' that envisages and encompasses the participation of various social actors, principally within urban environments. According to this view, together with demographic shifts showing significant growth in the Indigenous section of the population, notions of urban and cultural sustainability have become extremely relevant. In this regard, some considerations need to be made.

Despite growing Indigenous agency in discourse production within the Australian public sphere, Indigenous people living in urban areas have suffered from a lack of attention on the part of researchers and bureaucrats. This contrasts sharply with Canada as the only reality under scrutiny. In his study on citizen participation in Canada, with a focus on the Vancouver area, Kennedy Stewart (2006) has pointed out that sustainability, in its fullest sense, can only be achieved through the active participation of Aboriginal people in politics, through respect for land claims and self-governance and the incorporation of their cultural assets into mainstream society. The same political ideals ought to be applied to Australia in view of a sustainable future. Indeed, Indigenous epistemologies, with their systems of mores and ethics, attention and respect for the land and its biodiversity can provide the ideal terrain for modern discussions about sustainability, thus informing strategies and views on ethical practices.

D-Boy (Yung Warriors). Photo: James Henry.

Agyeman *et al.* (2002, p. 78) have defined sustainability as 'the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems'. Drawing on such a definition as well as the notion of equity—as discussed in other scholarship on sustainability (see Agyeman *et al.* 2003; Schnarch 2004; Stewart 2006; Tauli-Corpuz 2005)—here I will investigate the strategies employed by the new generations of Indigenous Australians to carve out autonomous spaces for reflection and socio-political activism through Hip Hop music. By focusing on two case studies, namely the Newcastle-based Hip Hop group The Last Kinection and the Melbourne-based Hip Hop group the Yung Warriors, I will demonstrate that these Indigenous artists are contributing to discussions of sustainability and citizenship through their interest in their culture and involvement in social activities. A close observation of their music will provide further insights into the complex question of who and what is 'authentically' Aboriginal, thus also reframing the Western dichotomy urban-*versus*-rural and contemporary-*versus*-traditional.

Music and Urban Sustainability

As mentioned earlier, the literature on urban sustainability has largely demonstrated the critical role played by Aboriginal 'actors' in creating a more sustainable environment. Indeed, cultural diversity may inform such issues, providing ethical imprints within Australia's sustainability projects (Ulluwishewa 1993; Wall & Masayesva 2004). Nathan Cardinal (2006, p. 218) has explained the benefits deriving from the encounter between urban sustainability and Indigenous knowledge in the Canadian context in the light of the Native's understanding of the land and its delicate eco-systems:

> Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of the area and provide a cultural link to the region's past social, economic, and environmental history. And unlike other subpopulations in the region, such historic links have translated into modern land claims and treaty negotiations, which are currently being pursued by existing First Nation groups in the region and will ultimately affect the future development, ownership, and subsequently, the sustainability of the region.

Hence, to be able to move towards an ethic of equity, Australia's colonial history needs to be investigated from the 'Indigenist' perspective, following Rigney (2006), who employs the term 'Indigenism' to acknowledge the recent academic improvements in depicting the variety of the Indigenous experience. Here the notion of 'Indigenism' promotes the creation of frameworks that can be moulded around the Indigenous reality/ies, in a way that coalesces with Western methodologies and their epistemes.

Indigenous Australians have suffered from a lack of recognition of historical and political agency and self-determination. The many Indigenous communities around Australia have been striving to get their voices heard and their rights recognized, not only as human beings, but also as human beings who evolve and change in a globalized world. Considering that a third of the Australian Indigenous population is distributed in urban areas, it is pivotal to take into consideration the impact of their presence on the territory. Contrary to conservative assumptions about an idyllic state of immutability, Indigenous cultures have been constantly evolving and re-shaping the external appearance of their cultures.

Although the colonial encounter has largely been imagined as one of the prominent factors in promoting transformation within Indigenous communities, the changes undergone by many communities after the colonial experience have little to do with that particular historical moment. Ethnographers like Sutton (1987, p. 78) for instance, argue that change is part of a 'dialectical tension between power and autonomy, and between order and disorder', thus demonstrating that change is an integral feature of Indigenous societies, in the words of Clunies Ross (1987, p. 7):

> Not only does the ideology of Dreamtime authority act as a control on change and a preserver of the wholeness of Aboriginal religious life, but it can be seen to have provided for its adherents a number of means by which the discrepancies between theory and practice can be accommodated.

In arguing the same point, Wild (1987, p. 106) also demonstrates the relevance of music as an index of change, 'the authority of song texts is both a conservative force and a means of legitimizing change'.

Changes to the cultural and social structure of Indigenous people have occurred within broader societal systems, adapting to and modifying the surrounding environment. The idea of the colonial frontier as 'fatal impact', popularized by Alan Moorehead's (1966) book, is still partially functioning as an erroneous parameter to measure cultural survival. In fact, not only are Indigenous epistemologies still operating within an Indigenous terrain, but they are also influencing the dominant culture in a way that could be of primary importance if used to inform sustainable ways of organizing space and life. Contrary to general assumptions, globalization has not been accepted passively, but it has engendered an active act of maintenance and change, where modifications have discriminated between productive, hence dynamic, and less-productive cultural elements. Taking into consideration Wild's reflections on music across Indigenous communities, I would argue that, as globalizing tendencies become significant at the level of global communications, the insertion of Indigenous culture into discourses that occur on a global scale also happens through songs' text.

In order to understand the methods employed by Indigenous youth in articulating strategies of cultural survival or, as Clunies Ross (1986) puts it, 'holding strategies', it is crucial to understand their efforts as a product of the socio-historical milieu wherein social phenomena like Hip Hop are grounded. In this respect, Aboriginal Hip Hop is located within a tradition of cultural continuity and survival, thus providing a portal for elaborating and experimenting with viable identities and disrupting crystallized representations of 'Indigeneity'. Certainly, one of the most striking features of this process is characterized by a stronger Indigenous agency, in particular with reference to participation in the socio-political debate in Australia. Hip Hop groups like The Last Kinection (TLK) and Yung Warriors (YW), for instance, engage in discussions of social justice in songs like 'Worth marching for' (TLK, 2008) or 'Black deaths in custody' (YW).

As the titles suggest, 'Worth marching for' and 'Black deaths in custody' tackle issues of social justice in a way that is overtly critical of Australia's colonial practices and their persistent imperialistic claims. For example, the words of 'Worth marching for' chant:

> What do we want? Respect!
> When do we want it? Now!
> What do we want? Justice!
> When do we want it? Now!
> What do we want? Rights!
> When do we want it? Now!
> (TLK 2008)

The urgent questions addressed by TLK resonate in the YW (2012a) 'Black deaths in custody' lyrics dealing with police violence against Aboriginal people:

> What do you know about Black deaths in custody?
> Another Black man in cuffs …
> What do you know about this bashing in the jail's cells?
> Police power tripping what these brothers screaming out…
> What do you know about this? A Black fellow in the back of a wagon
> It's hard to tell
> He's dehydrating as well, no water, no food, imagining how his family felt when they heard the news…
> *First we fight for our culture, fight for our rights, fight for our lives.*
> [emphasis added]

As we can easily infer from these excerpts, rap music has been employed by young Indigenous people to discuss their issues and express their needs, amongst others. This cultural music form has been utilized to carry out various tasks, ranging from socially engaged topics to less engaged and sophisticated ones. Focusing on political themes and identity issues it is possible to place these discussions along a continuum of cultural transmission. In addition, cross-cultural influences, together with the appropriation of elements belonging to different cultural traditions, like the African American, have been characterizing Indigenous arts/performances for over two hundred years both as a strategy of cultural survival and as an incentive to implement Indigenous discourses, thus enhancing their agency in a time of intensified globalization.

Culture constitutes the perfect terrain to discuss rights and politics, and assert a value system based on the Indigenous way of living. As we can infer from the content of these groups' music, values like spirituality, kinship and a deep connection with the land are still enduring in the voices of young artists like the YW. The Melbourne-based Hip Hop group formed by Tjimba Possum-Burns and his cousin Danny D-boy Ramzan, for example, embody and promote what they perceive to be fundamental aspects of their tradition. In the YW (2012b) song 'Hold on', Aboriginal Elder and singer Kutcha Edwards introduces the lyrics of the two rappers, who have dedicated the song to their grandfather Clifford Possum Tjapaltjari—an Indigenous painter of International fame—saying: 'We live culture, we live arts, we live dancing, and we live spirituality, we live our dreaming'. Kutcha Edwards's words embody the confluence of old and new and clearly express the idea of cultural continuity within Indigenous music, as well as the crucial role played by elders in leading the way. Both the physical presence of an elder, Uncle Kutcha and the act of paying homage to their grandfather, Clifford Possum, constitute a highly symbolic gesture, whereby cultural values are of primary importance for the YW (2012b), who rap 'We came from a family of kinship values and obtained the wisdom that our elders taught us/ and songlines go on for ever and ever and a family tree that we'll always remember'.

The YW, as well as TLK, create their narratives based on the centrality of family, weaving personal stories into the wider social fabric of Aboriginal Australia, as witnessed by songs like 'Hold on' (YW), 'Family love' (YW) or 'Find a way' (TLK). Once more, The Last Kinection have reinforced such an idea by saying that their last album '*Next of Kin* was really about our responsibility on taking in those roles that our elders have placed upon us' (*Gadigal Radio/Information,* 2011).

Conclusion

Australian Aboriginal Hip Hop, like Reggae music in the 1980s (see Bennett 2001) and other Western genres before, has provided young Indigenous people with an avenue through which their voice is asserted and can be heard. Further, Hip Hop has been rearticulated by the new generations, mainly to negotiate their identity and Western stereotypes around it, to discuss issues of social justice and to voice their concerns about the inequalities within Australian society. In particular, these new generations experiment and create viable discourses where the culture and value system of their elders mingle with the demands of a globalized era. Thanks to the adaptability and fluidity of rap music, Aboriginal youth have been able to express themselves according to new aesthetics, paving the way to new cultural trajectories that challenge static notions of 'Aboriginality' and authenticity, and carry on their ancestors' cultural heritage. This brief overview on strategies of Indigenous cultural reconfigurations through Hip Hop provides tangible examples of the Indigenous presence and involvement in the Australian territory and public sphere, thus implying that plans of urban sustainability cannot be conceived without consulting the Indigenous counterpart.

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The Healthy City

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The notion of the 'healthy city' is not a new idea. Power and politics aside, from their emergence, both eastern and western civilisations designed and built cities to service basic human requirements of shelter, water, food and culture—all of which, arguably, improved the lives and health of many. The history of public health has been closely tied to the conception of the healthy city. It was in the mid-nineteenth century, at a time of rapid city-based industrialization, that the first public health movement was established (Ashton *et al.* 1986; Petersen & Lupton 1996). However, the term 'healthy city' was not coined until the mid-1980s. Although it is not easy to pinpoint the exact moment of its first use, it was largely popularized through what has been called by some the 'international healthy cities movement', initially discussed in 1984 at the Healthy Toronto 2000: Beyond Health Care international public health symposium organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Ashton *et al.* 1986; Duhl & Hancock 1997). Evermore popular in discussions of the global city, 'the healthy city' concept is now used widely with little critique or reflection. This essay reviews the origins and definitions of 'the healthy city' and highlights some key criticisms. It aims to prompt further discussion and potential redefinition of this increasingly applied, yet potentially watered-down, ideal.

At the time of Healthy Toronto 2000 there was growing recognition of the impact of urban design and city living conditions on health outcomes (Kenzer 1999). Furthermore, it was recognized that better public health policies were needed to avoid 'victim-blaming lifestyle approaches to health promotion', which had become common in many countries (Ashton *et al.* 1986, p. 319). In 1986, the first international conference on health promotion was held in Ottawa, Canada, which culminated in the signing of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO 1986). In health promotion, 'health' is seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living or simply the absence of disease. The Ottawa Charter was designed to instigate action required to achieve health for all by the year 2000 (Baum *et al.* 2006) and advocated that health promotion is not only the responsibility of the health sector but also encompasses all sectors of society (WHO 2012a). The prerequisite conditions for health listed in the charter include peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources, social justice and equity (WHO 2012a).

WHO's Regional Office for Europe launched the Healthy Cities Programme[1] in 1986 with the participation of 10–12 European cities as signatories (Ashton *et al.* 1986; Duhl & Hancock 1997). It was to be a long-term development project, 'to place health on the agenda of cities around the world, and to build a constituency of support for public health at the local level' (WHO 1998, p. 13). Importantly, processes, not outcomes, have defined healthy cities. WHO (2012b) defines a 'healthy city' as 'one that continually creates and improves its physical and social environments and expands the community resources that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential'.

Since then, the Healthy Cities Programme has grown to include thousands of cities worldwide and the scope has expanded such that 'Healthy "Cities"' now include islands, villages, communities, towns, municipalities, cities and megacities. Aside from formal signatories to the WHO programme, various individuals, institutions and networks have adopted the WHO idea of Healthy Cities and the concept has influenced or instigated many other related initiatives (Kenzer 1999). Due to this wider influence, it is often referred to as the Healthy Cities 'movement' rather than the Healthy Cities 'programme' (Kenzer 1999, p. 201), although its claims to be a social movement have been called into question because it operates 'within a bureaucratic logic that stresses consensual, incremental change' (Baum 1993, p. 32).

Much of the definition of the modern conception of the healthy city can be attributed to Leonard Duhl and Trevor Hancock (1997) who were involved at the start of the Healthy Cities Programme.

1   Throughout this article capitalization is used to distinguish the WHO Healthy Cities Programme and formal Healthy Cities Projects from more generic usage of the term 'the healthy city'.