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Indigenous Hip-hop: overcoming marginality, encountering constraints

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses the creative and contemporary performances of young Indigenous hip-hoppers in two seemingly disparate places (Nowra, NSW, and Torres Strait Islands, QLD). Visiting two Indigenous hip-hop groups from these places—and drawing on interviews and participant observation—we explore the way in which emerging technologies, festivals, programs and online networking have helped enable unique forms of music making. In contrast to racist discourses depicting Indigenous youth as idle or inactive, our research participants demonstrated musical aspiration, creativity and a desire to express love of country and culture. Rather than assume cities and urban centres are hubs for creativity, hip-hop production is geographically mobile, operating in locations removed from large population centres. Indigenous hip-hop links up-and-coming with more experienced performers in what amounts to a semi-formal, political, transnational and anti-colonial creative industry. Geographical distance remains an ongoing challenge, but more than this, wider patron discourses framing what is expected from 'proper' Indigenous performance are the more profound coalface of marginalisation.*

KEY WORDS *Indigenous; young people; hip-hop; creativity; performance; patron discourses; marginalisation; Nowra; Torres Strait Islands.*

Introduction

This paper explores the creative musical performances of Indigenous youth from two socio-economically disadvantaged places—one in Australia's tropical north, the other just beyond the outermost edge of the Greater Sydney metropolitan area. In these locations, physical distance and poverty are conditions influencing the ability of creative artists to do their work, access opportunities and build careers. We discuss these themes in relation to young Indigenous people involved in the musical genre of hip-hop. We discuss how remoteness is managed, and marginality negotiated through the expressive medium of hip-hop and new recording and distribution technologies. In doing so, we seek to explore a network—semi-informal, political, transnational and often decidedly anti-colonial—which constitutes a new, vernacular, Indigenous creative industry in regional and remote Australia.

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But crucially, we also explore how physical distance and poverty are not the only barriers that creative artists negotiate. Young musicians navigate expectations of themselves and what constitutes 'proper' Indigenous performances in wider Australian cultural industries. We draw on van Toorn's (1990) concept of patron discourses to show how, beyond physical and socio-economic marginality, cultural norms and expectations frame what is possible, producing and restricting creative opportunities.

This article is a collaboration between two researchers—one Indigenous, one non-Indigenous (both having grown up in the Southern Illawarra)—who brought to this project different goals and backgrounds. For one this work contributes to a PhD thesis on young people as cultural assets in regional Australia (funded through the ARC Linkage Project Cultural Asset Mapping for Regional Australia—see http://culturemap.org.au/). The other is both a student and active member of the region's Indigenous hip-hop scene.[1] This collaboration provided unique links and personal connections through which fieldwork could be pursued (see below) but also constituted an example of research practice heeding calls in Aboriginal studies literature to bring to the fore critical questions of research ethics, subjectivity and Aboriginality (Langton 1993; Gibson 2006; Burarrwanga *et al.* 2008). It is as much an article born of a dialogic conversation between two researchers as it is the outcome of a regular research project.

Hip-hop: glocal, transnational, mobile music

Originating as a music format in the disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods of the Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn in New York during the 1970s (Kitwana 2003), and further building on Jamaican sound system culture (Bradley 2000), hip-hop traditionally involves dee-jaying (beat), rapping (MC), break dancing (B-boying) and graffiti elements. Its commercialisation has steadily transformed the genre from underground element of urban culture to mainstream, global industry, with its own distinct language (Samy Alim 2007), spawning fashion brands FUBU and Tommy Hilfiger. Aspiring young rappers have begun replacing dee-jaying elements with music software allowing at-home creation, cutting together different instruments to form unique instrumental sounds or beats.

A distinct discourse of locality and authenticity surrounds hip-hop (Pennycook 2007). For many black American youth in the 1980s and 1990s, disenfranchised with life in urban ghettos, hip-hop enabled articulation of oral stories confronting daily life on the streets; gang-related violence, extortion and drug dealing. As a way of traversing, navigating and making sense of daily struggles, youth turned to hip-hop for enlightenment (Kitwana 2003). Many listened and danced to rappers and DJs playing on street corners, before trying hip-hop. As underground and oppositional, street-performed hip-hop grew increasingly popular, drawing large crowds for neighbourhood 'bloc parties' (Toop 1984).

By the late 1990s, hip-hop was the highest-selling musical genre in America, with sales of 81 million albums in 1998 alone (Farley *et al.* 1999). Commercial, yet still confrontational and oppositional, hip-hop was globalised via CD, television and fashion, becoming a vehicle of expression and identification, particularly relevant for working-class, migrant and Indigenous youth (Mitchell 2003, 2006). Disenfranchised groups related to the identities and circumstances behind the music; it was linguistically powerful, at times arrogant—a platform where minority bodies

and voices were thrust into hegemonic and vice-regal positions in the media landscape (especially in music video clips).

In Australia hip-hop became popular amongst Indigenous youth, where influence from American hip-hoppers Ice Cube, TuPac, Snoop Dogg and Jay Z was strong. The uptake of hip-hop by Indigenous Australia can also be attributed to an evolving 'transnational black culture' (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004; White 2009). While hip-hop is global language, positioned around ideas of brotherhood and resistance, it is also an open soundtrack for interpretation and 'flushing' by local experiences, for 'the articulation of Aboriginal identity based on the valorisation of blackness' (White 2009, p. 108).

When performing in Australia, artists such as Snoop Dogg and Ice Cube have made efforts to connect with local Aboriginal populations, referring to cultural similarities during interviews and gigs, while making physical contact with communities, as Snoop Dogg recently did in Redfern in inner-city Sydney. A number of local performers have also played a significant role in indigenising hip-hop in Australia, actively tutoring and mentoring emerging and grassroots enthusiasts, hosting workshops, teaching skills and providing direct musical support. Aboriginal performers MC Munki Mark, Wire MC and Brotha Black provide cultural and creative learning for budding Indigenous artists (Mitchell 2006). Their music advocates pride and solidarity, projecting Indigeneity as brotherhood. These pedagogies help develop slick rhyming and language, performance and self-confidence through rapping.

Not restricted to Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane, Indigenous musicians are practising and performing hip-hop in remote and isolated communities in places such as Wilcannia (Wilcannia Mob), Bowraville (Bowra Rhythm Mob) and Kununurra (G-Unit). These locations have burgeoning hip-hop scenes despite geographical distance from Australia's traditional music industry centres. Despite emergent remote creative scenes, Indigenous hip-hop outside capital cities is yet to be documented or analysed academically. Where Indigenous popular music from remote areas has been a feature of academic work (e.g. Gibson & Connell 2004; Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004), it has often focused on country, reggae and rock styles. This article redresses that lacuna, drawing attention to Indigenous hip-hop scenes in Nowra and the Torres Strait Islands (TSI). In these places, hip-hop becomes a form of glocalised creative expression, a means to personal development, and simultaneously a politicised, transnational and anti-colonial creative industry. Before we turn to these case studies, it is necessary to outline the wider discursive context within which Aboriginal hip-hop circulates—for as we shall see, this discursive context comes to be as important (if not more so) than physical remoteness or poverty in constraining and mediating successful growth of Indigenous hip-hop as vernacular creative industry.

Indigeneity and patron discourse

> There is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community. (Langton 1993, p. 12)

Within cultural policy and planning, Indigenous culture has often been assumed as static rather than as culture always in creation (Stavrias 2005; Morgan 2008). Dominant stereotypes—like those mobilised in tourism (Waitt 1999) and cultural

industry promotion, especially visual art (Luckman *et al.* 2009)—have presumed Indigeneity as bounded by tradition, ethnicity and heritage. Rather than presume that 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander' is a racial, biological or natural concept, Marcia Langton argues that Indigeneity is a form of intersubjectivity, 'in that it [Indigeneity] is re-made over and over in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation' (Langton 1993, pp. 33–4).

Biological constructs of Indigeneity have long been shrouded in prejudiced ideas regarding racial purity—related to skin colour—and 'blood' inheritance. Opposing racial concepts, the idea of Aboriginality as intersubjectivity aspires to dismantle discriminatory representations and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to negotiate and resist racial or biological perceptions. Media forms including TV, film, literature and music are important arenas for understanding how Aboriginality is intersubjectively constructed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Michaels 1986; Langton 1993; Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004).

While Indigeneity should be understood as intersubjectivity, it is also arbitrated by geography and industry (Gibson & Dunbar-Hall 2004). At one level (and particularly for Indigenous cultural producers), identity is connected to perceptions of place and space; cultural identifications are recognised as spatially dependent (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). Place is crucial; sites of creation and birth, ceremony, celebration, historical and spiritual, all contribute to the constructions of individual and group categories of identification. At another level, industries that sell Indigenous creativity frequently trade on constructions of Indigenous identity. This has profound implications for emerging Indigenous cultural industries, and their success (or otherwise) in markets beyond Indigenous audiences. An example of the way in which Indigenous culture and creativity have been framed within essentialist discourse is in Aboriginal art from the Northern Territory. Traditional dot or x-ray art painted by artists from remote communities is considered 'proper' Aboriginal art, while authentic Aboriginal music is said to contain elements of 'traditional' culture, such as the didjeridu, or at least blend contemporary styles with traditional sounds (Gibson 2006). Viewed as 'traditional', these activities are promoted to tourists and visitors to northern Australia, while more contemporary or avant-garde activities escape touristic and commercial representation and are less often considered 'authentically' Aboriginal.

Colonial assumptions of Aboriginal and Indigenous cultural identity are inhibited, within what Langton (1993, p. 27) describes as 'an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated other'. This requires Aboriginal and other minorities to perform or be creative within symbolic frames, installed and maintained by demands of Western audiences for 'authenticity' (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004). Van Toorn (1990, pp. 102–3) calls these 'patron discourses', invoking sets of normative expectations within colonial society about how minority texts and artists should look, listen, speak and perform:

> To address an audience is to hold it in one's power; but it is also to place oneself in its power, to expose oneself to its judgements, its categories, the rules and customs that pertain in its culture ... The speech, writing and other cultural practices of minority groups are only liberated into the public domain to the extent that patron discourses succeed in trapping them in the categories which the dominant audience has available to contain them.

Against a backdrop of various attempts by Indigenous hip-hoppers in Nowra and the TSI to negotiate physical remoteness and socio-economic deprivation, we also explore below how patron discourses both provide and constrain performance opportunities.

Research contexts: Nowra and the Torres Strait Islands

Nowra, the main town in the Shoalhaven Local Government Area (LGA) on the south coast of NSW (see Figure 1), has a resident population of 30 000. During the summer holidays the town bulges as tourists pass through in accessing holiday spots in nearby Jervis Bay, Sussex Inlet and Ulladulla. Yet seasonal tourist traffic has brought Nowra limited economic or social benefit. Being inland, it has shared less in the tourism boom, instead constituting a regional service and retail centre along the major highway. It is a place characterised by high youth unemployment levels, out-migration and welfare dependence (ABS 2009a). Some 6 per cent of the population identify as Indigenous (ABS 2009a), a high proportion compared with national and State figures (2.1 per cent and 2.3 per cent, respectively), with 1 in 5 Indigenous people in Nowra aged 15–24 (ABS 2009a). In formal education, only 16 per cent of Indigenous youth complete a year 12 education in Nowra, compared to 31 per cent for non-Indigenous youth (contrasted to the national average of 42 per cent). Unemployment amongst the Indigenous population is 22 per cent, with a third of Indigenous youth aged 15–24 unemployed.

Another demographic feature of Nowra is the 'substantial net out-migration among those of school leaving age' (Shoalhaven City Council 2005). Between 2001

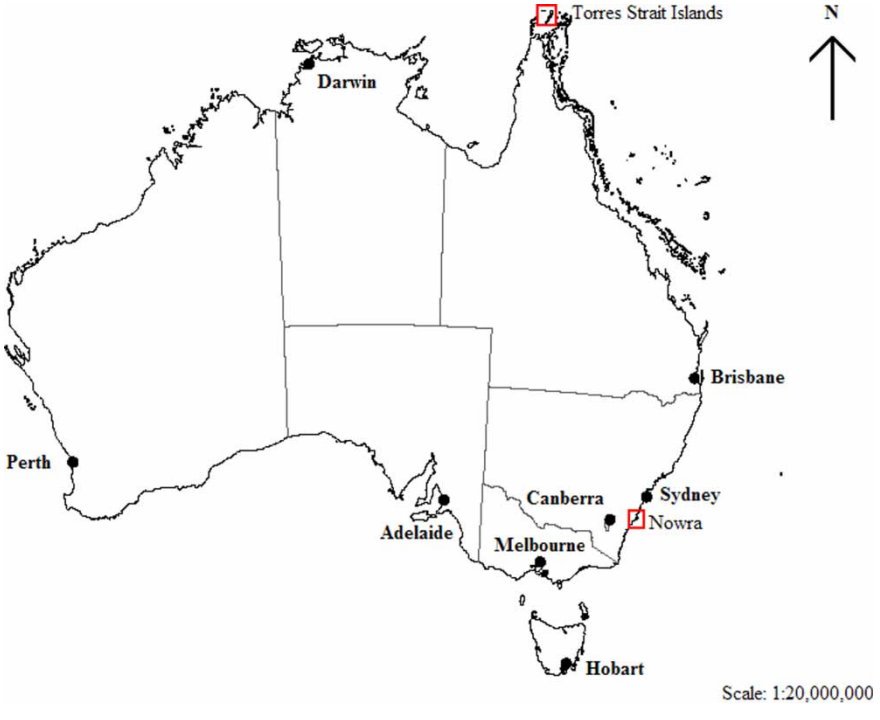

FIGURE 1. Location of Nowra, NSW and the Torres Strait Islands, QLD, Australia.
Source: Reproduced with permission from Geosciences Australia (2010).

and 2006 more than 10 per cent of Nowra's youth moved away, seeking employment and a better quality of life. Sydney, located 170 km to the north, is too far to commute to work or a social night out, so the best option often becomes relocation. Positioned at the margins of economic growth and social life, Nowra is a town facing complex problems, retaining a reputation for racial tensions, high rates of crime and violence, particularly in East Nowra, where around 20 per cent of the population is Indigenous (ABS 2009a; Shoalhaven City Council 2009). Stigmas are commonly attached to Indigenous youth in the town, depicted as delinquent, idle, and troublesome (cf. Dufty 2009). It is against this socio-economic and discursive background that we explore hip-hop in Nowra as vernacular Indigenous creativity.

The TSI, located off the coast of Far North Queensland, could perhaps be no more different to Nowra: home to 9000 residents scattered across 17 inhabited tropical islands. More than 80 per cent of the population in the TSI identify as Indigenous, related ethnically to Melanesia further to the north rather than to mainland Aboriginal nations. The dominant spoken languages are TSI Creole and other traditional Island dialects. Overall, the TSI comprise around 11 per cent of Australia's Indigenous population, but only 14 per cent of Islanders still live in the Islands (Trewin & Madden 2005). The physical distance of the TSI from the 'rest' of Australia cannot be easily overstated. Thursday Island (TI), the main population centre, is more than 3500 km from Melbourne and 2000 km from Brisbane. Where links exist with the mainland, they are commonly with Cairns (because of air transport) in Far North Queensland. Remoteness is a tangible part of everyday life in the TSI.

Although contrasting wildly in cultural and geographical terms, socio-economic trends in the TSI share some similarities with Nowra. The Indigenous population is four times more likely to be unemployed and more than twice as likely to be living in a low-income household compared to the non-Indigenous TSI population (ABS 2009b). Moreover, the retention rate in formal education for Indigenous youth in the Islands is half that of non-Indigenous youth; a similar ratio holds for non-school qualifications, such as a trade or diploma (Trewin & Madden 2005).

In these two socio-economically disadvantaged and geographically marginal settings flourishing Indigenous hip-hop scenes have emerged, overwhelmingly dominated by young people. Here, hip-hop is an example of creativity inspired by transnational cultural flows (and attendant linguistic and political features), but forming and operating within local spaces, geographically removed and socio-economically isolated from prosperous cities (places more predictably featuring in creative cities research). Creative city ideas developed elsewhere—of critical mass, cluster effects and creative milieu, considered key for urban creativity and innovation—are tested deeply in these case studies.

Methods and tools: researching Indigenous hip-hop

Our research approach sought depth of insights, but needed to remain flexible. The project initially focused on Nowra, concerned with 'hanging-out' and meeting young people involved in music. The local youth centre became a key research location, regularly utilised by youth participating in hip-hop. Hanging out at the centre helped build friendships and trust with a number of young hip-hoppers. After initial meetings, participant observation and a research diary were used to reflect on meetings, both *in situ* and out of context (Kearns 2005). These notes then formed the basis for subsequent semi-structured interviews. Six young rappers were

interviewed, but our focus here is on the music produced by one hip-hop group who call themselves Yuin Soldiers, and in particular their three rappers Yung Nooky, Nat and Selway (see Plates 1 and 2). Combining interviews and participant observation with the group's music making provided a rich and extensive outline of processes for creating Yuin Soldiers' beats, lyrics and performances.

Next, the research drew on personal networks, expanding the focus to incorporate hip-hop from the TSI. Knowledge of the growing 'scene' in remote northern Australia allowed researchers to access a hip-hop crew called 'One Blood Hidden Image'. The group consists of six members from across the TSI. Our interviews and subsequent conversations were conducted with four members of the group; Maupower, Mondae, Cagney and Big Worm. We also listened closely to their songs and performances, which had been uploaded onto YouTube.

Methodologies varied for each study location. For Nowra, time could be spent moving through the youth centre, observing interactions and performances taking place within its spaces. A more ethnographic, in-depth analysis could therefore be undertaken, with data collection drawn out from extended visits with participants. For the TSI, methodologies needed to be more flexible. It was not possible to visit islands directly; instead, in-depth phone conversations, interviews and e-mailing with our TSI participants took priority.

Analysis of interviews, research notes and music then drew on an adapted form of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is argued by Wiles *et al.* (2005) to be a sensitive way of writing fieldwork into geographic research 'because it focuses on how people talk about and evaluate places, experiences and situations, as well as what they say'—in our case what was said and rapped (cf. Skelton & Valentine 2005). One approach to analysis occurs where several narratives are used as 'case studies' to demonstrate different aspects of the same conceptual outcome (see Gorman-Murray 2006). In this case, differences are brought out across narratives to construct a range of emergent 'themes' reinforcing the same point, from different perspectives. Following this approach, analysis needed to be sensitive to individuals and their hip-hop stories, providing opportunity to acknowledge how each respondent built up their hip-hop experiences, ideas, networks and knowledge.

PLATE 1. Yung Nooky in the studio at Nowra youth centre. *Source*: Authors.

PLATE 2. Yung Nooky and Selway performing at an Indigenous celebration event. *Source*: Authors.

Producing Indigenous hip-hop

Torres Strait: One Blood Hidden Image (OBHI)

Hip-hop music has become very popular among Indigenous youth in the TSI, attracted to its fast, funky beats, expression and accessibility. Big Worm, the newest OBHI member explained its popularity:

> We were doing it on the streets, around the Straits, fucking around, then Patrick came out with that single 'Home boys', that's when we all got like, yeah we can all do that too you know. That's when we started getting into it, we loved it, bro. Its poetry, like what you go through [in life], it's a good opportunity to use that in hip-hop. Now we be walking around town and stuff, and these younger fellas start coming up everywhere rapping, and we like, yeah you're good man, keep it up. (Big Worm)

OBHI have gained increasing exposure within the Indigenous hip-hop scene (see Plate 3). Comprising originally five main MCs—Patrick aka Maupower, Josh aka Cagney, Damien aka Mondae, Dayne aka Dayne-Jah, and Leroy aka Artu, the group have since incorporated several other members, including Troy aka Big Worm. OBHI work to create a distinctive hip-hop sound, mixing traditional Creole language with cultural stories and messages. The music has appealed to Indigenous elders across the TSI, who recognise its widespread appeal for youth. According to Maupower:

> It's Torres Strait Island hip-hop, an Indigenous hip-hop, we incorporate our language and culture into that style, that genre ... We get a great response from the elders cause that's a new genre for them. They're not used to hip-hop, and we show that we can incorporate our culture into hip-hop, and their like WOW, keep it up. (Maupower)

To create and produce their own unique beats, sounds and rhymes, OBHI have become skilled at using computer music programs such as Fruity Loops, Acid and Reason that give aspiring hip-hoppers in remote locations the ability to sample and

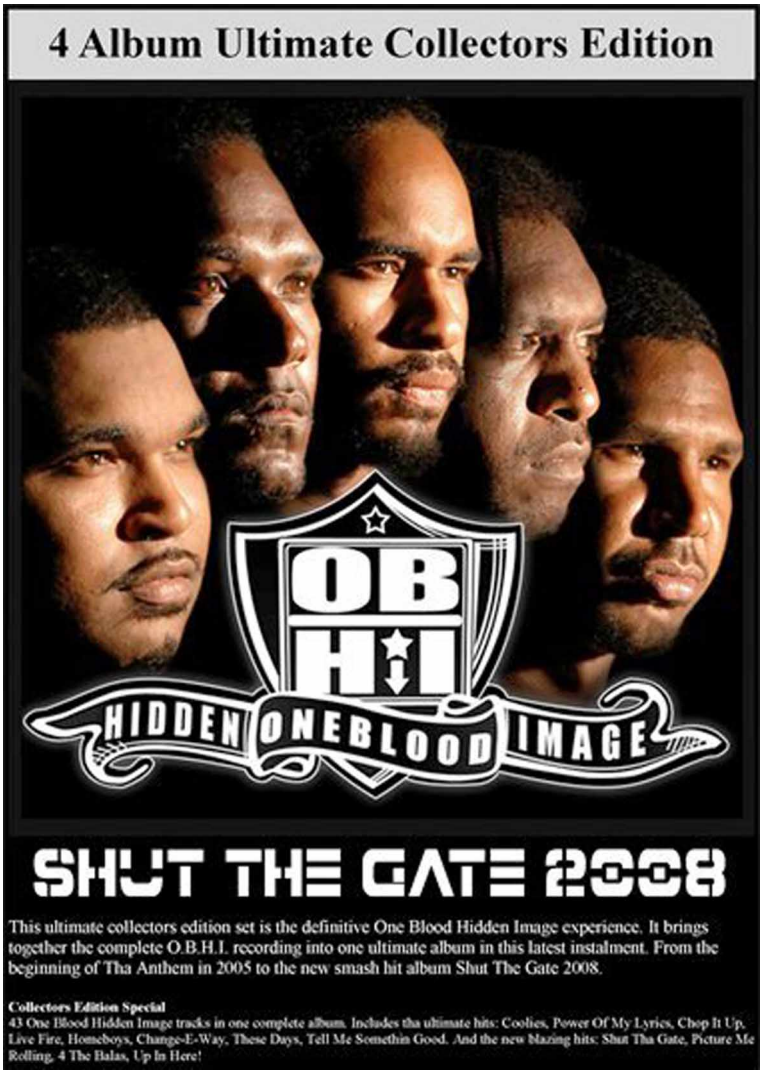

PLATE 3. OBHI's *Shut the Gate* album (2008), sold through the group's website. *Source*: www.maupower.com.au

fuse together sounds to compose original beats, without relying on city recording studios:

> Well I started using Fruity Loops, now we have upgraded. I'm using Adobe Edition, a bit of Reason, ACID. I use Reason for the samples but I still record [raps] in Adobe. (Maupower)

While all performers in the group created their own beats using computer programs, Mondae was the 'lead beat master':

> I listen to the music, focus on the beats. It comes natural, some days I can do 3 beats. I use the laptop and Fruity Loops, go through every instrument [in the program], mix in different instruments, change up

> the pace, go through, clean it up, til you've got something ya like. (Mondae)

Making beats was a technical skill, requiring practice and refinement. Computer programs were cheaper than DJ equipment and could be self-learnt, allowing participants to sample instrumental segments from other genres. OBHI liked to 'cut' in reggae sounds, snare drums, with deep bass guitars, manoeuvring the pace of beats, slowing down or speeding up, depending on message and the type of song. After the beat and rap were brought together the group recorded their music using Maupower's homemade studio. Emerging technologies of hip-hop production created a more accessible, do-it-yourself (DIY) musical form. The order for creating a new hip-hop song was variable for OBHI, dependent on time, the availability of members and motivation:

> You know like sometimes, we have a beat and we write the lyrics, sometimes we have the lyrics and mix and compose a beat to it, depends how we feel at the time. Sometimes we just get into the studio and do it all up there at the same time, on the spot. (Cagney)

OBHI uploaded music onto video networking sites like MySpace and YouTube, where two tracks, 'Coolies' and '4 the Balaz' have received 20 000 'hits', a significant number for an underground, unsigned group. The band also sells and promotes their music (four albums) online via their website, along with clothing and other merchandise (see www.maupower.com.au). Their sound is driven and produced by modern technologies and techniques, mostly circulated electronically. Group members are often stopped in the street and praised for their music, while Maupower was nominated for a 2009 Deadly Award (the national Indigenous music awards). Through beat mixing, rhyming, performance, dancing, and computer skills, hip-hop is a means to be creative.

Nowra: Yuin Soldiers

On most afternoons the Nowra youth centre's music rooms are occupied by groups of young hip-hoppers. Emerging here is a group called Yuin Soldiers, who have a shifting line-up including Corey aka Yung Nooky, Nat and Selway, Nooky's cousin. Recognising a growing interest by young people from the area in hip-hop, the youth centre has built two music rooms used by budding musicians for learning, practice, and performing. The soundproof room allows hip-hoppers to mix beats and rhymes, record their tracks and place them onto CD or Mp3 player. The services at the youth centre are crucial for grassroots music making in Nowra, providing the only free space in town to use dee-jaying turntables, mixing, editing and recording equipment.

The production of new songs for Yuin Soldiers, like for OBHI, was reliant on computer programs and technologies, creating sounds and beats for the rappers. For Nooky, creating 'cool' beats was a skill that required practice and perseverance. He credited Selway for helping with beat creation:

> Sometimes I don't pick it up, and I get frustrated at it. I'm getting better, my cousin [Selway] helps the most. He can just rip em out. Too easy. And they sound so good. It's a skill that I'm learning. (Nooky)

Nooky outlined how he composed songs:

> . . . We put the beat on there first [demonstrates on the computer screen], then we rap to the beat. You do your back-up vocals and you compress it, bounce it down and it's ready for CD. Sometimes I can do it in 40 minutes, but then sometimes it can take a few hours or days to do a song. It depends. I'm always writing. When I'm at home I write, and when I'm at school . . . (Nooky)

To assist Yuin Soldiers' hip-hop, more established Indigenous artists provided encouragement, informal schooling and even direct help with composing sounds and beats. Older performers like Wire MC, Brotha Black and Street Warriors were seen as 'inspiration' for Yuin Soldiers and their music making:

> There's Wire MC, I think he's related somewhere down the line . . . he's really good, Brotha Black and Street Warriors, and all the Indigenous rappers they inspire me. (Nooky)

Wire MC and Indigenous performer Choo Choo (CuzCo) had previously collaborated with Yuin Soldiers. For Nooky, his older cousin Selway, a skilled hip-hopper from a group called East Coast Productions (ECP), was another prominent figure assisting in his musical production:

> I usually get my beats off my cousin [Selway] because mine still aren't that good yet [laughs], he gives me a lot of beats and we sit at home and sometimes I think of stuff and start writing or something happens and I'll just start writing about it. If I write something than I'll just ask my cousin for a beat. (Nooky)

OBHI, with most members in their 20s, had been practising and refining hip-hop over several years. Yuin Soldiers—Nooky, Selway and Nat—aged in their late teens, were younger and less experienced performers. They spoke of building up skills for music making. In the same way as OBHI were promoting hip-hop in the TSI to younger, budding hip-hoppers, 'showing them the way' (Big Worm), Yuin Soldiers had drawn on the expertise and experience of more established acts like Wire MC and Choo Choo, to advance their creative skills.

Managing and navigating remoteness through music

Torres Strait Islands: OBHI

Each member of OBHI was born on different parts of the TSI. This has geographic significance for the group, for, as Maupower explained, OBHI invented their name through their geography:

> We were singin like nobody, we didn't have a name; just called the rap group. The original five members were sitting around and said we want to come up with a name which could be a concept that represented us as a group. We tried to find one, because each member represents one particular region. The Torres Strait is subdivided into 5 different regions; we have the inner islands, the near western, the central, the top western and the eastern islands, and each member came from that blood line, those regions and we were all related. So we had a blood line connection,

> and so we said we are all one blood, with no particular image, so we all had different forms, and that's how we evolved to One Blood Hidden Image. (Maupower)

Rather than isolation and remoteness from large cities being paralysing for creativity, OBHI overcame distance through hip-hop. Combining music with new technologies, like YouTube, the TSI are positioned in their hip-hop as a musical hub. Indeed, the group have uncovered opportunities to travel and experience the rest of Australia, performing their music, in Brisbane, Sydney, Newcastle, Melbourne, Adelaide and Auckland. Their songs project messages about brotherhood and maintaining a positive outlook:

> Blood is what you make it, how else can I say it?
> Who has got your back when the end of the day hits?
> Different day same shit? NO, I wouldn't change it,
> [chorus] This is something for my Balaz [brothers],
> Through the struggles that be holding you down,
> Keep your head up, you gotta keep your head up.
>
> (OBHI- '4 the Balaz' (brothers): see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhantuJZpBY)

Cagney and Maupower explained how isolation and remoteness were managed in the TSI. As the established hip-hoppers in the region, the group became involved in schooling younger budding rappers, especially in their own hip-hop production, giving the 'young fellas' something positive to do:

> Well making it up here is easy, I show most of them [young fellas] how to build a home studio and record it, we all use the same program, so we'll all interact together. (Maupower)

> There's a lot of mob now starting to come out. There was a lot of shame. Shame was big up here, and so for them young kids when we up on stage, we say come down here, watch us, we notice how all of a sudden they have courage to get up themselves. We do workshops too; do up a beat and each person has a line by line. Everybody got their story and in this way [hip-hop] even the smallest voice can be heard you know. (Cagney)

Overcoming the 'shame' factor, performing and expressing themselves in front of audiences was an issue facing many young people in the TSI. Those who had taken the 'jump' forward to performing their music had gained important benefits, according to Big Worm:

> When they have a go at the workshop, rap to the beat, the young fellas go yeah, this is cool. We get them to write their raps down, then they can record and play them back. It gives them a buzz bro eh? Like you see it on their faces; Fuck, we can do it. (Big Worm)

Creating hip-hop was accessible for most young fans in the TSI because of cheap technology and available mentoring, giving them a 'positive thing to do' (Cagney). Maupower took an active role in schooling younger enthusiasts, showing youth how to set up their own recording areas in the home or garage. The local library and TAFE also provided places to practise music. While remote and marginal, the TSI

has a growing music scene with creativity funnelled into the production of beats and rhymes.

Nowra: Yuin Soldiers

While not as geographically remote as the TSI, Nowra is socio-economically and in a certain way also geographically marginal. This marginality is openly confronted by Yung Nooky and Nat, through their raps and narratives, performing both individually and as Yuin Soldiers with Selway. When asked about the origins of their group's name, Nooky explained that:

> Yuin is our people, like where we come from, and soldiers, they keep fighting and never give up, so that's where the name Yuin soldiers came from. (Nooky)

Their music confronts prejudiced experience, with Nowra seen as a place perpetuating racialised ideas of Aboriginality. One of Yuin Soldiers' songs 'Subliminal twist' raps about the marginality experienced by Indigenous youth in Nowra:

> Blackfella on the hunt,
> Sick of being called a little black cunt,
> While I'm walking I'm thinking,
> Is this the price of education?
> Heartache, racism and discrimination?
> I'm sick of teachers saying these kids ain't black,
> Just because were not as dark as them Williams' girls ...
> [Chorus]
> You had your chance and you couldn't make me quit,
> 3 months from now, I'll be done with this shit,
> So until then I'm a stay strong and continue to spit,
> These lyrics with a, with a subliminal twist, subliminal twist.
> (Yuin Soldiers)

Nowra was consistently identified as a place which embodied intolerance. Yuin Soldiers' music was a powerful way of breaking down and confronting these issues. Also, in parallel to their sense of discouragement, were feelings of attachment to Nowra and the south coast:

> Well Nowra is where we live and grew up so its home, that's a strong feeling, like this is your place. But it's also a place that gives you the shits. You've got to get out of Nowra for a while; it can get you down, but go away, then come back and keep goin. It is a beautiful place and that, but it can be a pretty racist place you know? (Nooky)

Nowra is home, yet consciously is also a place to escape. Living in Nowra is seen as a struggle or fight for Indigenous youth, metaphorically drawn out in a Yuin Soldiers rap, where Nooky makes comparison with American boxer Ruben 'Hurricane' Carter:

> South Coast Hurricane ... you can call me Ruben Carter,
> Instead of a right hook, it's the rapper Yung Nook ...

> The first round's already won,
> 2541 ask around I'm the man in that town,
> I'm goin big with my South coast sound.
> [Chorus- Nooky and Nat]
> Ah welcome you all to the South coast flow,
> On the map we're big, that's how we roll, yeah got the endless rhymes, yeah for the endless crimes.

In Nowra's Aboriginal hip-hop, local experience is integrated with a politicised transnational black culture. Music making can be drawn from daily experiences within marginal places, providing creative stimulus for rhymes and raps. Hip-hop allows negotiation through confrontation, using a 'loud, cool and stylish' (Nat) form of music.

Performing hip-hop

Torres Strait Islands: OBHI

While practising in the TSI was considered 'easy', gaining access to performance spaces outside the islands was more difficult and attributed to the region's 'remoteness' (Mondae). However, from analysis of interview transcripts and research diary notes, marginality emerged as not the only barrier to performance as OBHI sought widespread recognition. Gigs have been dominantly bounded within Indigenous ceremonies, events or festivals: National Sorry Day, Reconciliation events and NAIDOC celebrations. These performances provided rare travel experiences to locations across mainland Australia; hence they were recounted very positively.

Yet Maupower, Mondae, Big Worm and Cagney said in interviews how remoteness in the TSI left musically talented youth frustrated, unable to access opportunities to play their music to larger audiences on the mainland, or make any significant income from their work. OBHI themselves rarely received invitations to play at music festivals or gigs outside of symbolic Indigenous events:

> Well we started out here performing in NAIDOC, cultural weeks up here, cultural festivals up the Torres straits, and we started moving down to like the styling up festivals [Indigenous hip-hop event] in Brisbane, Survival day in Adelaide, and Sydney as well, but we perform mostly cultural events. (Maupower)

To improve musical skills, participants spoke of 'moving to the mainland' (Big Worm) for education and opportunity. On the mainland Maupower and Mondae had learnt more 'formal' music skills—recording, computer programming and professional networking—called upon for accessing performance opportunities. Access thus required participants to move outside the Islands. Big Worm told of needing to 'get away' from the TSI, recently deciding to move to Brisbane for greater opportunities:

> When I was living there, it was no opportunity; I want to do more music. I've got to know a few of the artists around here, and you say can I come on your track, so you try and get an opportunity like that but it's hard. We did play Styling Up in Brisbane, in Sydney for an anti-government

> thing . . . We try to get gigs paid for and accommodation paid for, but some people just don't pay that money, so we all have to chip in money to do it. You do it for the passion. (Big Worm)

Playing gigs to non-Indigenous audiences was rare; receiving payment for their shows or funding for recording or workshops was rarer still. Members had strong aspirations to forge professional music careers, moving away from the TSI, at various times, to pursue those goals. However, their ambitions of becoming professional hip-hoppers were yet to materialise, in part due to patron discourses restricting avenues for paid performance.

Nowra: Yuin Soldiers

Yuin Soldiers also commented on the limited support for musical performance in Nowra. Indigenous celebrations such as NAIDOC events supplied the majority of their hip-hop performance opportunities. In addition to Yuin Soldiers' hip-hop, Nooky and Selway are involved in traditional Aboriginal dancing. Most performances outside of Nowra privileged their traditional Aboriginal dancing over hip-hop. It was rare for any of the young rappers to play a hip-hop gig at school for a band or music day, or at non-Indigenous music festivals. Music celebrated at these events was likely to be other genres, like punk, rock music, or so-called traditional Aboriginal performances, like didjeridu playing or dancing:

> Mostly, like the NAIDOC week people ringing me up, and like [pause] yeah there's places I have performed at, like here [Nowra youth centre], and I'm performing here next Friday, and up at the showground in the middle of town but you mostly get booked out for Indigenous type events. (Nooky)

On occasions when Yuin Soldiers' performed outside Indigenous events, participation was often confined within touristic representations of Aboriginality, confined to traditional dancing. Nooky and his cousin Selway had performed traditional Aboriginal dances for World Youth Day in Sydney, in front of a large audience, before being invited to perform a hip-hop set, which fused traditional dancing elements with their beats and rhymes. This was a highlight, lamented as a rare opportunity to showcase their contemporary rhyming and performance skills. The lack of hip-hop opportunities contrasted with the praise from audience members and other more established musicians, at their gigs. A local Aboriginal community event, called 'A new beginning', celebrated during reconciliation week, was a performance that received special acclaim from an unlikely fan:

> Yeah like at that Bundanoon one [gig], this old, this lady came up and said 'I don't like rap but I love what you did'. And this fella from Wollongong Mr. McFlawless, yeah he got in contact with us and said it was good, and [I] went up [to his house] and did a song with him. (Nooky)

Despite performing a modern, creative and expressive Aboriginality ('our culture, it's like, we sing and dance and hip-hop fits in good'—Nat), there was a scarcity of encouragement from the wider non-Indigenous community. With ambitions to become a professional performer, Nooky, like Maupower and Big Worm, has relocated from his local town, enrolling in a formal performing arts school on the

NSW central coast, hoping his relocation will help access career opportunities in performance.

Conclusions

Aboriginal hip-hop is 'creative' because it is concerned with being artistic, resourceful and innovative. Hip-hop is a glocal subcultural performance (Mitchell 2003), and an oppositional musical form (Iveson 1997). Importantly, creativity is central to its practice. Music making involves acts of craftmanship, manoeuvring, recording and performing.

Hip-hop is also a fusion between the traditional (language, cultural stories, histories and dance) and contemporary (equipment, software and technologies), music richly performed by Indigenous participants, appropriated through transnational black networks, across diverse locations. Despite isolation from centres with large populations, creative buzz and critical mass—the factors seen as crucial in much creative industries literature for fostering and promoting creative talent—Nowra and the TSI emerge as hubs for the creative production of this contemporary music form. Their local hip-hop scenes highlight the possibility for creativity, richly present outside creative cities.

Certainly, new media and communication technologies have increased the accessibility of contemporary music forms, shifting exchanges of information and symbolic goods (Burgess 2006; Kruse 2009). Production and consumption of music is increasingly reliant on these emerging technologies. Individual songs, albums and entire discographies are downloaded from Internet sources such as iTunes or Limewire in minutes, transferring music to CD and Mp3 players. Computer programs help develop unique sounds and beats, often replacing the need to learn technical instruments. Music can be made at home or at the local youth centre, recorded and uploaded to YouTube or Facebook sites. In turn these networks spread music to larger audiences, promoting skills and ambitions of grassroots, underground, as well as signed professional performers. Key to it all is a sense of solidarity among hip-hoppers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and a desire to expand the creative community through sharing, learning and helping others.

When talented, aspirational young rappers demonstrate creative skill and ability, geography has not been the only barrier to success or opportunity. Patron discourses have restricted performance opportunities. Both OBHI and Yuin Soldiers have to navigate wider expectations. These expectations have framed possibilities, at times creating but also constraining opportunities. Like many other 'hidden' hip-hoppers across Australia, OBHI and Yuin Soldiers articulate an ambition to integrate creativity into professional, paid or career work. They have identified their talents and skills and have been applauded for them, but face locational and discursive barriers for implementing a pathway into professional creative work.

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NOTE

[1] Rob Evitt is Indigenous and belongs to Yirandali Aboriginal nation, in the Hughenden area of north-west Queensland. Andrew Warren is non-Indigenous, completing his PhD in Human Geography at UOW.

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