

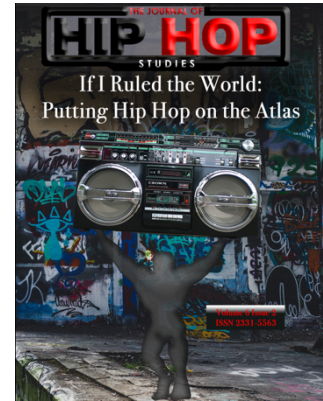
"I Got the Mics On, My People Speak": On the Rise of Aboriginal Australian Hip Hop

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Abstract

In this paper, an Aboriginal rapper and settler-Australian Indigenous Studies lecturer collaborate to provide an overview of the Aboriginal Australian Hip Hop scene. We contextualize the development of Aboriginal Hip Hop as part of a long postcolonial tradition of Aboriginal engagement with Black transnationalism. By analysing rap lyrics, Hip Hop videos, and related commentary, we demonstrate the ways in which Aboriginal hip hoppers have adapted elements of Hip Hop culture to suit their own cultures, histories, and structural position as a colonized minority under the rule of a modern settler-colonial state. We conclude by considering Aboriginal engagement with Hip Hop culture as part of the ongoing development of Aboriginal cultures in an era of globalization.

Introduction

From the Bronx to the bush, via the Block at the heart of Aboriginal Sydney, the sounds, style, and substance of Hip Hop have been resonating with Aboriginal Australia for over three decades. With each year, the Aboriginal Hip Hop community grows stronger. This paper is the outcome of collaboration between an Aboriginal rapper and a settler-Australian Indigenous Studies lecturer. Monica R. Miller, Daniel White Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney have noted that just as Hip Hop itself "has developed into a trans-global phenomenon," scholarship on Hip Hop has made its way into a diversity of academic disciplines.¹ Here, we draw on the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies to demonstrate the ways in which Aboriginal hip hoppers have adapted elements of Hip Hop culture to suit their own cultures, histories, and structural position as a colonized minority under the rule of a modern settler-colonial state.

On one level, Aboriginal Hip Hop can be understood through Halifu Osumare's concept of "connective marginalities."² Osumare describes connective marginalities as "social resonances between black expressive culture within its contextual political history and similar dynamics in other nations."³ Many Aboriginal rappers have commented on the resonance of American Hip Hop with their own experience. Yolngu rapper Baker Boy recently made this point when he told an interviewer of his early experience of Hip Hop: "I could relate to the struggles when it comes to community life."⁴ In this paper, however, we argue that the relationship between Aboriginal people and Hip Hop runs deeper than contemporary connective marginalities.

We seek to provide an overview of Aboriginal Hip Hop contextualized as a recent manifestation of a longer tradition of Aboriginal engagement with transnational Black discourses and culture including Garveyism, blues, reggae, and Black Power. As with other manifestations of this tradition, Aboriginal hip hoppers have adapted elements of the culture for their own purposes. Conversely, Aboriginal Hip Hop sees the adaptation of pre- and post-invasion Aboriginal traditions to suit the form and style of a now globalized Hip Hop culture.

A Connective Marginality

Aboriginal Australian communities share many historical and political circumstances with African American communities. Both have been subject to a history of racist oppression and face enduring systematic discrimination and structural disadvantage. Both are racial minorities subject to the rule of white-dominated, settler-

¹ Monica R. Miller, Daniel White Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney, "The Hip in Hip Hop: Toward a Discipline of Hip Hop Studies." *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 6.

² Halifu Osumare, "Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe," *The Journal of American Culture* 24, no. 1-2 (2001): 171-181.

³ Osumare, "Beat Streets in the Global Hood," 172.

⁴ Tamara Howie, "Arnhem Land Rapper Danzal Baker Making Impact on Australian Music Scene," *NT News*, July 16, 2017.

colonial, democratic states. While these broad similarities have allowed for the development of a sense of shared struggle between Aboriginal and African American peoples, we do not wish to overstate their equivalence. The political circumstances of Aboriginal Australians are, of course, specific to their own histories and status as a colonized indigenous minority.

Since 1788, when the British empire invaded the Dharug Aboriginal Nation (where the city of Sydney now stands), Aboriginal peoples have been subject to a litany of settler-colonial policies, technologies, and practices that have sought to clear the way for colonial and national expansion. In the broadest and crudest of terms, this has included: frontier massacres;⁵ legislation designed to contain them on missions and reserves, where their languages and ceremonies were forbidden;⁶ exploitative labour arrangements;⁷ and the removal of children from their families, at least partly to desocialize them as Aboriginal.⁸ Since the mid-1990s, the neoliberal turn in Australian Indigenous affairs policy has brought a renewed, if disguised, governmental interest in the assimilation—now rebranded as “mainstreaming” or “normalisation”—of Indigenous peoples.⁹

The colonies, and later the state of Australia, were founded on the notion of *terra nullius*—that they were legally unoccupied prior to British colonization. The British Crown did not recognize the sovereignty, law, or property of the over two hundred Indigenous nations that occupied the entire continent. It was not until the 1992 *Mabo* High Court decision that the existence of any Native title to land was acknowledged by settler-colonial authorities. The sovereignty and law of Indigenous Australian peoples, past or present, have yet to be formally acknowledged by the settler-colonial state.

Of course, Indigenous Australians have asserted their own individual and collective agency throughout the post-invasion history of the continent. They have done so not only by resisting colonialism, but by drawing on the various forms of knowledge, tradition, and technology available to them in particular historical moments and social and geographic locations. In the contemporary historical moment, this includes the relatively new traditions of Hip Hop culture. Martin N. Nakata describes such processes as happening at the “Cultural Interface.”¹⁰

⁵ Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2006).

⁶ Bain Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989).

⁷ Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore, “Working for the White People: An Historiographic Essay on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour,” *Labour History* 69 (1995): 1–29.

⁸ Peter Read, “How Many Separated Aboriginal Children?” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 49 (2003): 155–163.

⁹ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen: Race War and the Pathology of Patriarchal White Sovereignty,” *History, Power, Text: Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies* (2014): 310–330.

¹⁰ Martin N. Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

The concept of the cultural interface was developed in order to highlight the complexities and tensions that emerge when Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems of knowledge converge. It seeks to circumvent the effects of binary thinking and the authenticity dilemmas that often follow. The cultural interface is a contested space of shifting intersections between different people, traditions, histories, experiences, and agendas. As Nakata explains, it is a space of possibilities as well as constraints:

People act in these spaces, drawing on their own understandings of what is emerging all around them, drawing on collective understanding, drawing on historical ways of understanding. All these sets of understandings may themselves draw from many different and/or contested points of understanding, including those that derive from traditional knowledge, from Western knowledge, from previous experience of the intersections between them and so on. In this process people are constantly producing new ways of understanding and at the same time filtering out elements of all those ways of understanding that prevent them from making sense at a particular point in time and trying in the process to preserve a particular sense of self or, in the case of collective efforts, a particular sense of community, always itself a subject of ongoing discussion and ongoing change.¹¹

Over the last three decades, Hip Hop has emerged as a potent medium for Aboriginal youth to make sense of, and express, their sense of self and community as a colonized minority in a globalizing world. As we argue in the following section, Aboriginal engagement with Hip Hop is best understood as a recent manifestation of a much longer tradition of cultural exchange between Aboriginal and Afro-diasporic peoples.

An Aboriginal Tradition of Transnational Cultural Exchange

Cultural and political exchange between African American and Aboriginal Australian peoples precedes the rise of Aboriginal Hip Hop by almost a century. African American and Afro-diasporic thinkers were influential in the development of Aboriginal activism from the early twentieth century.¹² Blues, funk, soul, and reggae music have inspired Aboriginal musicians for many generations.¹³ This has been facilitated, in part, by a sense of shared struggle against racism and White oppression. Post-invasion Aboriginal identity has been constructed partially through a dialogue with Black cultural forms and political issues that are transnational.¹⁴

John Maynard traces the first significant instance of transnational Black influence on Aboriginal political mobilization to the foundation of the Coloured Progressive Association in 1903.¹⁵ Aboriginal leaders such as Fred Maynard, Tom Lacey, Dick Johnson, and Sid Ridgeway propelled Black activism into the 1920s, when, through

¹¹ Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages*, 199–201.

¹² John Maynard, *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 18–34.

¹³ Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds*, 120.

¹⁵ John Maynard, "In the interests of our people': The Influence of Garveyism on the Rise of Australian Aboriginal Political Activism," *Aboriginal History* 29 (2005): 2.

engagements with African American seamen on the docks of Sydney, they gained knowledge of the work of thinkers including Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglas, and W. E. B. Du Bois among others.¹⁶ This early transnational history is occasionally celebrated in Aboriginal Hip Hop, for instance Darah's (2012) lyric in "Australian History 101": "1900s on missions had us living like prison, in the 20s we studied Garvey's Black Nationalism."

The Black connection continued into the mid-1920s, when Australia launched its own branch of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). It was renamed the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) in 1925 but continued to incorporate much of Garvey's philosophy. Fred Maynard was elected president of the association and was heavily influenced by the work of Garvey and the UNIA. Maynard and Tom Lacey studied the ideology of the UNIA and understood Aboriginal-specific issues in relation to the international struggles of Black peoples.¹⁷

Similar political organizations emerged throughout the 1920s and 1930s, such as Victorian Australian Aborigines League and the New South Wales Aborigines Progressive Association. During the 1960s, Aboriginal activists drew on the language and ideas of the African diasporic freedom struggle in order to connect their own struggles to a more global movement.¹⁸ In 1965, Charles Perkins led a group of students from the University of Sydney on a bus tour—dubbed the "freedom rides"—of regional New South Wales to expose the racism and segregation practiced there.¹⁹ From the late 1960s, an Australian Black Power movement emerged in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane.²⁰ It gained momentum after Dr. Roosevelt Brown gave a public talk at the invitation of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne in 1968. The movement drew heavily on the works of Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, and Frantz Fanon.²¹

The Emergence of Aboriginal Hip Hop

Aboriginal musicians have also found inspiration in African American and Afro-diasporic traditions for many generations. As Cameron White demonstrates, the politically charged genre of reggae has had a particularly powerful influence on the

¹⁶ Maynard, "In the interests of our people," 11.

¹⁷ Maynard, "In the interests of our people," 12.

¹⁸ For a full description of the African diasporic freedom struggle during the 1960s which entails African diasporic peoples around the world unified against white supremacist practices see Michael O. West, William G. Martin, Fanon Che Wilkins, eds., *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002).

²⁰ Gary Foley, "Black Power in Redfern, 1968–1972," essay on Gary Foley's website, accessed 17 December 2015, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html>.

²¹ Foley, "Black Power in Redfern."

Aboriginal music scene.²² Reggae presented a musical manifestation of transnational blackness, resistance, and style. Its influence is evident in the language and musical style of pioneering Aboriginal Hip Hop groups such as CuzCo and Local Knowledge as well as more recent artists such as Baker Boy.

Given the history of Hip Hop culture as a platform of expression for the marginalized and voiceless, as well as the shared heritage of Black nationalist and Black Power discourses that influenced the evolution of rap, it was a matter of course that Aboriginal youth would be drawn to Hip Hop culture and establish its place in an Australian context.²³ Evoking Osumare's concept of connective marginalities, Wire MC describes the common Aboriginal sense of a shared struggle with African Americans:²⁴

Black America and Black Australia have a connection for one main fundamental reason: White hatred. White racism. That's how far back the connection goes ... It was a slave's voice, it was a poor man's voice. It was a hungry child's voice, you know, and we could relate to that voice, we could hear that voice. 'Cause we had them same voices in our own communities, in our lands. And this is the original song of Hip Hop.²⁵

The power and image of politically charged rap groups from the late 1980s held a particular appeal for many Aboriginal youths in Australia. Aboriginal rapper BrothaBlack of South West Syndicate recalls imitating Chuck D of Public Enemy in his youth.²⁶ Aboriginal rapper Lez "Bex" Beckett from Cunnamulla details seeing African American rappers on his television screen at a young age:

Before Australian and Aboriginal hip-hop really took off, we [Aboriginal youth] all followed what the Americans did. It really influenced me because it was a black face on the television, and when you are a young fulla growing up in Cunnamulla in central Queensland, it is a pride thing to see another blackfella in a position of power.²⁷

For many, N.W.A. was the epitome of Black Power in music, a force to be reckoned with. Wire MC talks of their most controversial hit:

²² Cameron White, "'Rapper on a Rampage': Theorising the Political Significance of Aboriginal Australian Hip Hop and Reggae," *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 4 (2009), 108–130, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/TfC/article/viewArticle/1070>.

²³ Ernest Allen, "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996): 159–191.

²⁴ Osumare, "Beat Streets in the Global Hood."

²⁵ Grant Leigh Saunders, *B.L.A.C.K.: An Aboriginal Song of Hip Hop* (Australian Film Television and Radio School, 2005).

²⁶ Tony Mitchell, "The New Corroboree," *Meanjin: New writing in Australia* 65 (2006), 20.

²⁷ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds*, 123.

What really grabbed my attention was N.W.A. saying ‘Fuck the police!’ ... groups like N.W.A. were saying things that we wanted to say but were afraid to say because of the past history between our people and police.²⁸

And elsewhere:

I could really relate to Ice Cube [of N.W.A.]. Like me, he was an angry young black man, but he was very intellectual about it and he was telling his reality which was removed from my reality, but there were parallels, you know, a black man speaking out about the white oppressor.²⁹

Gangsta rap also appealed to a young Briggs in school. Ice Cube quickly became his favourite rapper, and he jumped at any opportunity to spend time listening to his music:

At school, we had like a reading post. I’d be like, “I finished my work! Can I go in the reading post?” ‘Cause they had better headphones. And I’d go in there and I’d put on my Ice Cube tape and sit in with my book and just flip through it. And they must have thought I was the best reader.³⁰

In 2010, Briggs achieved a position in Ice Cube’s Australian tour as a supporting act, a remarkable moment for a fresh MC in the Australian Hip Hop scene.

Tony Mitchell identifies 1982 as the year of Aboriginal Hip Hop’s birth, and MunkiMuk as its founding father.³¹ In the early 1980s, the Hip Hop pioneer would catch the train from south-west Sydney to the Sydney Opera House in Circular Quay, carrying a roll of linoleum over his shoulder.³² He would then throw down his linoleum and breakdance for hours with his friends, attracting crowds of Sydney-siders and tourists. Hip hoppers also instigated “rap jams” in Circular Quay, complete with DJs and MCs, which attracted large groups of Aboriginal and Lebanese Australians.³³ DJs would find any source of power to connect their turntables and congregate with breakdancers and MCs. According to Ward’s history, whenever MunkiMuk’s “friends found a power point they could tap, the breaking jams grew huge – and started to be raided by the police. To avoid the heat, the jams moved to Martin Place and started attracting thousands of people

²⁸ White “Rapper on a Rampage,” 110.

²⁹ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds*, 128.

³⁰ “Briggs,” ABC Online Indigenous Programs – Message Stick, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s3532287.htm>. ABC has archived the show but the episode with the documentary on Briggs can be watched on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3rlm9UqNoI>. “Briggs on *Message Stick*,” *YouTube*, posted by Aboriginal Rap, October 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3rlm9UqNoI>.

³¹ Mitchell, “The New Corroboree.”

³² “Munkimuk” *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk About Their Music and Country*, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.realtalkthebook.com/home/munkimuk>.

³³ “Munkimuk,” *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*.

every weekend."³⁴ In this way, early Australian Hip Hop echoed the kind of urban mobility outlined in Tricia Rose's account of early American Hip Hop.³⁵

As had been the case in the American Hip Hop scene, early Australian Hip Hop involved racialized contests over access to public space.³⁶ MunkiMuk recalls a police raid in the early 1980s:

Then the cops shut the whole thing and it turned into a riot because—you know, coppers turning up, all guns blazing ... The next day in the newspaper they called it "Ethnic riots in Sydney CBD" with no explanation of what was going on or whether it had anything to do with anything. You know how the media put their spin on a thing. So they kind of shut that down.³⁷

Since then, Munk has gone on to educate youth and communities, both in urban and rural areas, on the power of Hip Hop. Munk founded the *Indij Hip Hop Show* on Koori Radio in 2007, based on the *Hip Hop Show* broadcast by Triple J (the national public youth radio station), but more specifically for Indigenous Australian rappers and rap groups who would otherwise not gain radio airplay. By then, Munk had already appeared on the *Hip Hop Show* as well as on Koori Radio on numerous occasions. He recalls the moment the idea came to him to develop a platform for Indigenous rappers:

For years, all these young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rappers have been giving me their demos—and guess what? They're sitting in my room doing nothing. So what I want to do is do a show, and I'm just gonna play 'em. That's it. I've got enough there to go for months!³⁸

Munk stepped down as the regular host for the *Indij Hip Hop Show* in September 2014 but the *Indij Hip Hop Show* remains strong in staff, music, and fan base.

By the 1990s, commercialised, globally distributed rap music had gained notoriety for its supposed imagery of violent posturing, machismo, misogyny, and materialism. The gangsta image appealed to Australian and Aboriginal audiences. Initial opinions were reactionary in response to Hip Hop's ever-growing popularity in Australia, with politician Peter Costello referring it as a sign of the moral decline of Australian youth.³⁹ Australian authorities have attempted (and at times succeeded) to prevent American rappers such as Eminem and 50 Cent from entering the country on the basis of bad character.⁴⁰

³⁴ "Munkimuk," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*.

³⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 51.

³⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 40.

³⁷ "Munkimuk," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*.

³⁸ "Munkimuk," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*.

³⁹ Mitchell, "The New Corroboree," 21.

⁴⁰ Stavrias, "Droppin' Conscious Beats and Flows," 44.

Initially, many Aboriginal Elders feared the influence of gangsta rap and considered Hip Hop a destructive influence on the youth.⁴¹ Now, after many successful Hip Hop workshops facilitated by rappers Wire MC and Morganics, Jimblah, and MunkiMuk among others, many Aboriginal communities and Elders have come to embrace the educational potential of rap music and Hip Hop culture. Wire explains:

Sure [Elders] have that preconceived idea that that's what Hip Hop is ... So people in my community are like I don't want my grandson or my little nephew being like them niggaz and you know calling women bitches and think life's all about money. And then we'll do our workshops and then old women in the community, Aunties, tell me, 'I really like what you're doing. You showed me Hip Hop is more than what I thought it was.'⁴²

The more controversial themes of rap music such as misogyny, violence, drug use, and materialistic braggadocio are relatively absent from the Aboriginal Hip Hop scene. This has mostly been due to Hip Hop workshop facilitators and positive role model MCs like Wire, MunkiMuk, and Baker Boy. Such workshops typically draw more on the tradition of "message rap" and use it as a medium to disseminate an education of self-expression for disenfranchised and disadvantaged young people across all ethnic backgrounds.⁴³ When comparing Aboriginal rap to mainstream Australian rap, Aboriginal rappers work with an "innate sense of community obligation," as Wire MC elaborates:

The difference I find between Aboriginal Hip Hop and white Australian Hip Hop [is that] we have a deep sense of community obligation, we are born with it, and that's why you don't hear black MC's—I can say all of the ones I've come across—using words like "bitches," they won't diss women. Because my mum isn't a bitch, my grandma isn't a bitch, and the mother the land ain't a bitch.⁴⁴

Although Hip Hop's journey from America to Aboriginal Australia evolved at a gradual pace, it has now established a thriving culture of Aboriginal breakdancers, DJs, MCs, and aerosol artists. Hip Hop has become an established element of post-invasion Aboriginal culture and is being creatively explored by a great number of Aboriginal artists.

Aboriginalizing Hip Hop

In this section of the article, we seek to demonstrate how artists working at the cultural interface have brought Aboriginal and Hip Hop traditions together to create Aboriginal styles of Hip Hop and Hip Hop styles of aboriginality. In pursuit of this objective, we analyze the lyricism, musicality, and videography of publicly released Aboriginal Hip Hop tracks, supplemented by published interviews with artists. Our

⁴¹ Stavrias, "Droppin' Conscious Beats and Flows," 50.

⁴² Stavrias, "Droppin' Conscious Beats and Flows," 50.

⁴³ Mitchell, "The New Corroboree," 21.

⁴⁴ Tony Mitchell, "Blackfellas Rapping, Breaking and Writing: A Short History of Aboriginal Hip Hop," *Aboriginal History* 30 (2006): 136.

analysis is structured around two exemplary music videos: Briggs's 2015 "The Children Came Back" and Baker Boy's 2017 "Could 9."

In 2015 Briggs released "The Children Came Back" to champion Black excellence and highlight the Indigenous Australian achievements since the celebrated Aboriginal blues singer Archie Roach released "Took the Children Away" in 1990.⁴⁵ Lyrically, most striking feature of the song is Briggs's reference to a myriad of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander icons in sports, music, politics and his own immediate family. For example:

[Verse 1]

*I'm Fitzroy where the stars be, I'm Wanganeen in '93
I'm Mundine, I'm Cathy Free-man, that fire inside-a-me
I'm Adam Goodes, and Adam should be applauded when he stand up
You can look to us when that time stop I'm Patty Mills with the last shot*

*I'm Gurrumul, I'm Archie, I'm everything you ask me
I'm everything you can't be, I'm the dead hearts, heart beat*

Throughout the song a theme is established as the leaders and heroes mentioned are identified as Briggs. Briggs identifies himself as Aboriginal sporting heroes such as NBA player Patty Mills and Australian Rules Football icon Gavin Wanganeen, music legends such as Jimmy Little and Archie Roach, political leaders such as Doug Nicholls and William Cooper, as Yorta Yorta country such as "the sand hills on Cummera" and "the carvings outta every scar tree," as an urban Aboriginal community (Fitzroy, Melbourne), and as his own family and community, citing various uncles and other Briggs's as well as "Rumba" (an Aboriginal Australian Rules Football team based in his home town of Shepparton). This establishes a pan-Aboriginal motif that expands out from Briggs himself, through his family and Yorta Yorta nation and country, to identify all Aboriginal people as a whole. Aboriginality becomes the persona of the song.

Such use of lyricism to discursively strengthen Aboriginal identity and community is common in Aboriginal Hip Hop. This is often made manifest in collaboration. For example, the closing track on MunkiMuk's album *Renegades of Munk*, entitled "The Last Word," is a colossal twelve-minute collaboration with thirty-five Indigenous and non-Indigenous Hip Hop artists. The entire project is based on the musical rubric of the Hip Hop cypher. Rappers take turns featuring on "The Last Word," some rapping for eight bars, others for sixteen. The most notable appearances are among the likes of Naomi Wenitong (The Last Kinection), Nooky, Jimblah, and Birdz, as well as Aboriginal Hip Hop pioneers Big Naz (South West Syndicate), Deekay (Native Ryme) and Rival MC (Impossible Odds). The song exists as a cultural gathering and a combination of youth and Elder members of the Aboriginal Hip Hop community. Most

⁴⁵ "Briggs," *ABC Online*.

rappers “give props” to MunkiMuk on the track, paying respect to Munk by acknowledging him in their individual verses:

[Verse 3: Deekay]

*From Redfern to Brisbane, can't help but listen
It's MunkiMuk, Deekay in a spit of wisdom*

[Verse 4: Mistery]

*I'm hailing here from Sydney
South West is the area I'm bringin' Munki with me
Like Michael Jackson rappin'...*

[Verse 5: Nooky]

*10 Years Too Late [Munk's 2005 EP] Munk is still singin' "checkmate"
And I never hesitate to put a sucker in their place*

[Verse 19: Sesk]

*Most fly, Sesk, MunkiMuk on your playlist
"Pump it up loud and annoy all the neighbours!"
[Munk's catchphrase as host of the Indij Hip Hop Show]*

Guest rappers position MunkiMuk as a legend in Aboriginal Hip Hop history and an authority and role model in the Hip Hop community, analogous to the status of Elders in the wider Aboriginal community. Frank, a cohost on the *Indij Hip Hop Show*, has stated this explicitly to Munk: “Bro, you’re definitely a pioneer of Indigenous Hip Hop, man, and definitely I think an Elder in our community, in the Hip Hop community at least.”⁴⁶ This represents a kind of continuity between Aboriginal tradition and Hip Hop and contributes to the distinct Aboriginal Australian way of doing rap music.

The theme of community building is also evident in Local Knowledge’s seminal “Blackfellas,” released in 2005. In the music video, they call upon and celebrate different Indigenous groups across Australia as they cruise in a drop-top convertible around the Block in Redfern:

[Chorus]

*All the Murries, all the Kooris
All the Goories, can you hear me?
All the Nyoongahs, all the Nungas
All the Bama, can you hear us
All the Wongii, all the Yamagees
All the Murridees, can you handle these*

⁴⁶ “Munk’s Last Stand,” *Indij Hip Hop Show* on Soundcloud, accessed January 28, 2016, <https://soundcloud.com/indij-hip-hop-show/munks-last-stand>.

*To the Torres Strait, and the Palewa
To the Anangu, to the Yolngu*

Their song is about "getting young blackfella mob back into their culture and teaching our history through music" and was played on high rotation by the national Triple J radio network.⁴⁷

Similar to Briggs in "The Children Came Back," Darah's song "My Heroes (Salute)" is a Hip Hop anthem honouring the great Indigenous leaders that, since invasion, have fought for the betterment of Black Australia and have instigated sociopolitical change. Darah explains in an interview with Mat Ward:

These aren't government-appointed "leaders," these are individuals who took charge and gave their all to improve our condition. You won't learn about them in school textbooks, but they are very important and deserve to be acknowledged ... we have to teach our kids about the Aboriginal freedom fighters.⁴⁸

The rapper's passion for enlightening the nation about Aboriginal freedom fighters is evident in the lyrics of "My Heroes (Salute)," particularly in the chorus:

[Chorus]

*William Cooper, Doug Nicholls, Jack Patten, (Salute)
William Ferguson, Pearl Gibbs, Bill Onus, (Salute)
Fred Maynard, Tom Lacey, Marge Tucker, (Salute)
Kath Walker, Bruce McGuinness, Bill Cragie, (Salute)*

*Michael Anderson, Tony Coorey, Bertie Williams, (Salute)
Chicka Dixon, Robbie Thorpe, Alf Bamblett, (Salute)
Bob Maza, Gary Foley, Paul Coe, (Salute)
These are just a few of my heroes⁴⁹*

Both Darah and Briggs have received feedback from their heroes commending the rappers for their activist work in educating fans and listeners about the many role models of their communities. Darah talks of Aboriginal activist, academic, and actor Dr. Gary Foley:

I would say that Gary Foley is probably my biggest influence. He has been a part of so many important moments and movements for Aboriginal people ... his ability to express the nature of racism embedded within Australian society against Aboriginal people is second to none.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mitchell, "The New Corroboree," 25.

⁴⁸ "Darah," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.realtalkthebook.com/home/darah>.

⁴⁹ Darah, "My Heroes (Salute)," *i believe in revolution* (2012), CD.

⁵⁰ "Darah," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*.

Dr. Foley lectures in history at Victoria University and has been a prominent Aboriginal activist since the 1970s. He has been impressed by Darah's passion for teaching his Indigenous history through his rap music, and has even deemed Darah and fellow Shepparton rapper Big Luke as "the next generation of freedom fighters."⁵¹ Similarly, Archie Roach has spoken of Briggs's song as a sequel to his own, and says, "I love Briggs's song. It's about our Indigenous heroes. Using a part of my song, where it says "the children came back" is really what the song is about. I feel proud to be a part of what Briggs hopes to achieve and I really love that he used young children to play the heroes because they are our future heroes."⁵²

Archie Roach's 1990 blues song "Took the Children Away" tells the tragic story of the Stolen Generations—the state's forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families—via Roach's own life experiences. It became an anthem for the Stolen Generations, winning several awards, including an international Human Rights Achievement Award. The last verse of "Took the Children Away" tells the epilogue to the story, that many members of the Stolen Generations, including Archie, eventually found their way home. This is where Briggs picks up the story in "The Children Came Back." Aboriginal peoples' survival of the Stolen Generations is set among the many achievements of Indigenous heroes in multiple fields of endeavour. As Archie Roach notes above, the music video casts Aboriginal children as the heirs of Indigenous excellence.

Young Samara Muir is cast as the celebrated Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman, and the video features her running on an Olympic size race track. In May 2015, three-year-old Samara Muir was racially vilified by a woman and her two daughters in the line of a Disney *Frozen*-themed event at a shopping centre. The woman in front of Samara turned and said, "I don't know why you're dressed up for because Queen Elsa isn't black," after which one of her daughters said to Samara, "you're black and black is ugly."⁵³ Samara's story spread worldwide via her mother's Facebook post, retelling the distressing incident. It was in response to this incident that Briggs invited her to appear in the video. Here, Samara represents a real, living example of a connection, bound by identity, to the entire Aboriginal community. She represents an Aboriginal future that builds on a foundational tradition of resilience and excellence. The video concludes with a flash of photographs taken at a protest against the forced closures of Aboriginal communities in Western Australia that was held in March of 2015. The images circulate to the pace of the clapsticks and foot stomps to imitate an auditory and visual sense of

⁵¹ "Darah," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*.

⁵² Andrea Booth, "The Children Came Back: New Song Celebrates Indigenous Heroism Ahead of NAIDOC," *NITV News*, 3 July 2015, <http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2015/07/03/children-came-back-new-song-celebrates-indigenous-heroism-ahead-naidoc>.

⁵³ "Three-year-old Aboriginal Girl Victim of Racial Abuse: 'You're black and black is ugly,'" *News.com*, June 23, 2015, <http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/three-year-old-aboriginal-girl-a-victim-of-racial-abuse-youre-black-and-black-is-ugly/story-fnu2q5nu-1227410641110>.

traditional Aboriginal dance and ceremony, combined with the themes of Indigenous resilience and resistance to colonizing forces.

Collective resistance to colonialism is another recurring theme in Aboriginal Hip Hop. Rap music can operate as a means of mobilizing around an issue, such as happened in response to the Western Australian state government's proposed plan to close one hundred and fifty Aboriginal communities that was announced in late 2014.⁵⁴ In March of 2015, then prime minister Tony Abbott defended the plan to close the communities, saying "what we can't do is endlessly subsidize lifestyle choices." This, which has come to be known as Abbott's "lifestyle choices" remark, left many in remote Aboriginal communities "hurting inside."⁵⁵ Pat Dodson, former chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, responded to Abbott's comments, saying "[i]t is not a 'lifestyle choice' to be born in and live in a remote Aboriginal community. It is more a decision to value connection to country, to look after family, to foster language and celebrate our culture. There are significant social, environmental and cultural benefits for the entire nation that flow from those decisions."⁵⁶ In solidarity with Dodson and a multitude of other Indigenous Australian leaders and public figures, a number of Aboriginal rappers used their public platform to protest and publicize the proposed action through music. Some examples are Perth rapper Ziggy's "Stepping on Their Toes" (2015):

[Verse 1]

*I ain't choose this lifestyle it chose me
They turning off the power so we won't see
Ironically it sparked a bulb in me that I don't
need Tony's electricity to be free*

and "Closure" by Provocalz (2015):

[Verse 1]

*Yo, They're cutting off the lights,
cutting off the water
That Australian tradition
of Indigenous slaughter*

From the size of Redfern

⁵⁴ Richard Howitt and Jessica McLean, "Towards Closure? Coexistence, Remoteness and Righteousness in Indigenous Policy in Australia," *Australian Geographer* 46 (2015): 137-145.

⁵⁵ Michael Gordon, "Tony Abbott's Lifestyle Choice Remark Leaves 'everyone hurting inside' in Remote Indigenous Communities," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 14, 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/tony-abbotts-lifestyle-choice-remark-leaves-everyone-hurting-inside-in-remote-indigenous-communities-20150313-143lh7.html>.

⁵⁶ Pat Dodson, "Tony Abbott's Lifestyle Comments Highlight the Lack of Policy in Aboriginal Affairs," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 13, 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/tony-abbotts-lifestyle-comments-highlight-the-lack-of-policy-in-aboriginal-affairs-20150311-141u4s.html>.

to the Kimberley's daughters
Dispossession, disempowerment by
Government orders

Perhaps the most potent example of resistance to colonialism in Aboriginal Hip Hop is AB Original's "January 26." The song from 2016 has become an anthem for the movement to change the date of Australia's national holiday from its current date marking the beginning of the British colonization of Australia. Aboriginal people commonly refer to this date as "Invasion" or "Survival day." The track "January 26" is uncompromising in its critique and mockery of Australia Day. For example:

[Verse 1: Briggs]
They said, "Hey, Briggs, pick a date" (okay)
"You know, one we can celebrate" (for sure)
"Where we can come together (yeah)
Talk about the weather, call that Australia Day"
I said, "How about March 8th?" (that's a good one)
And we can do it on your Nan's grave (got that, bitch?)
We can piss up, piss on her face
Get lit up and burn out like Mark Skaife

Here Briggs characterizes celebrating Australia Day as drunkenly pissing on the graves of Aboriginal ancestors. He calls out the gormlessness of expecting Aboriginal people to celebrate Invasion Day and points to the hypocrisy of white Australian stereotypes of Aboriginal drunkenness.

The video clip for "January 26" is based around four scenes in which the relationship between Aboriginal and White Australia is reversed. In the first scene, Yorta Yorta rapper Briggs and Ngarrindjeri rapper Trials accost a white Australian man and rob him of his cultural identity (an Australian flag) and traditional food (sausages for a barbeque). In the second scene, the white Australian, deprived of his traditional food, is seen being diagnosed with diabetes by an Aboriginal doctor. The third scene sees Briggs and Trials, as policemen, aggressively arrest and interrogate him for no apparent reason besides his otherness. Finally, back at his apartment, when the white Australian looks into a mirror, he sees an Aboriginal man, with the Australian flag behind him replaced by an Aboriginal one. The white Australian fantasy of assimilation has been achieved, but in reverse.

In 2017, AB Original's "January 26" reached number 16 in Triple J's *Hottest 100* poll—a cultural institution in Australia and touted as one of the biggest music polls in the world—and fueled a debate about changing the date of Australia Day. As a consequence, Triple J Radio conducted a survey of listeners and from 2018 changed the date of its annual *Hottest 100* countdown from the Australia Day public holiday to the last Saturday of January.

Two singles from Dhuwa rapper Baker Boy featured in the 2018 *Hottest 100*. "Marryuna (featuring Yirmal)" came in at number seventeen and "Cloud 9 (featuring Kian)" at number seventy-six. Both songs rap in a mix of English and Baker Boy's Yolngu Martha Aboriginal language. In an interview with Neda Vanovac, Baker explains his motivation for using both languages: "What I'm trying to do is put two worlds, merge into one and get a strong connection with both worlds."⁵⁷ Like others before him, Baker uses his traditional language to Aboriginalize Hip Hop.

The use of Aboriginal languages has been a consistent element of Aboriginal Hip Hop music since at least the late 1990s. For example, Birdz uses the Butchulla language in his energetic song "Dreamtime" from his 2013 EP. "Birdz Eye View":

[Verse 1: Birdz]

Wadjala yuloi doongoi? (2x)

It means "where you from?", yo, in the Butchulla language

First thing said when the white man landed

Now we ask that question to ourselves, stranded...

[Outro: Birdz]

Nga Dju yaa-m Dhanawu-na (I am speaking to everyone) (2x)

Ngay yaa-la-m Butchulla (I am speaking Butchulla) (4x)

As well as aboriginalizing Hip Hop, the use of "lingo" (Aboriginal languages) contributes to the ongoing battle to maintain and revive Indigenous languages. In 2013, Australia set the world record for linguisticicide, with ninety-two percent of Indigenous languages only rarely or no longer spoken.⁵⁸ Rapper Birdz talks of this forced disconnection from culture, language, and identity:

The dispossession and dispersing of Indigenous people meant that we not only lost our land but we lost our connection to self. Our knowledge of self was stolen from us. This is cultural genocide. This is why people like myself have to go back and search long and hard for our respective mobs' languages. Moreover, sometimes it's difficult to find elders who are still around and willing to teach us. In my experience, it's been difficult approaching some of my elders, some of which I'm only just meeting for the first time due to my family's history of dispossession. Asking them to teach me things that I've missed out on is sometimes a sensitive topic because of the trauma they've experienced.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Neda Vanovac, "Arnhem Land Performer Inspiring Kids with Goal to be First to Rap in Indigenous Language," *ABC News*, September 12, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-21/arnhem-land-musician-wants-to-be-first-to-rap-in-language/8543752>.

⁵⁸ Andy Park, "Linguicide: How Dying Languages Kill Multiculturalism," *SBS News*, last modified August 26, 2013, accessed 15 October 2015, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/03/21/linguicide-how-dying-languages-kill-multiculturalism>.

⁵⁹ "Birdz," *Real Talk: Aboriginal Rappers Talk about Their Music and Country*, accessed January 28, 2016, <https://www.realtalkthebook.com/home/birdz>.

For Aboriginal rappers whose languages are “sleeping” (not currently spoken), colloquialisms from Aboriginal English dialects are frequently incorporated into lyrics, contributing to cultural pride and a distinct style of rap music. Darah stylizes the Aboriginal slang term “gammin” in his song “Why U Gammin” (2011), meaning “why are you joking/pretending.” Here, the rapper has taken a word that is strongly associated with Aboriginal culture and language, and positioned it to become the central focus of the song. Two songs from The Last Kinection’s *Nutches* are also centered on Aboriginal colloquialisms. “PMD (Propa Mad Deadly)” and “Black and Deadly” (2008) both emphasise the colloquial notion of “being deadly,” as evident in their titles. The rap group even named their nationwide tour in 2009 “The Propa Mad Deadly Tour.” Rapper Nay found motivation to write “Black and Deadly” after a confrontation of racism with a stranger on the way to Newcastle. After Nay sought advice from her father, he responded, “[w]ho cares? You’re black and deadly. Who gives a crap?” His direction inspired Nay to approach these perceptions with counter racism and to utilize rap music as a cultural resource for empowerment. Nay explains in an interview at the Saltwater Freshwater Festival in 2013:

I was like, I wanna write a song like that, for everyone. So if they ever feel like, “Yeah nah, I am black and deadly man.” It doesn’t matter what you say to me, you know, I’m not gonna get offended, I’m not going to get upset about it, I’ll just feel sorry for you now.⁶⁰

The use of Indigenous languages in Aboriginal Hip Hop can be traced to the late 1990s, when South West Syndicate’s core members MunkiMuk, BrothaBlack, Big Naz, and Dax traveled with Triple J and a program called the *National Indigenous 3 on 3 Basketball and Hip Hop Challenge*, also known as “Vibe 3 on 3.” It included a rapping and breakdancing competition where Indigenous teens gathered to embrace Hip Hop culture. Munk took the opportunity to encourage teens to rap in their native language. He explains:

With Vibe 3 on 3 and Triple J we’d be travelling to all these different communities where people weren’t speaking English . . . English wasn’t their first language and it wasn’t their second or third language. I was like, “Oh, wow. Man, this is kinda cool. I’m gonna learn some of this lingo and try to throw it into raps.” So I started doing that just to show the kids in these communities that, “English isn’t your first language, so guess what? You don’t even have to rap in it! If you wanna rap in your language, just do it. Look, watch!” And then I started going round the different communities and everywhere I’d go, they’d go, “Hey, lingo rap! Do the lingo rap!” All of a sudden I was known as “the lingo rapper.”⁶¹

The work of rap groups like South West Syndicate have encouraged Indigenous youth to engage Hip Hop as a contemporary space to celebrate and help revive the languages of their peoples.

⁶⁰“The Last Kinection” *NITV On the Road: Saltwater Freshwater*, Season 2013, episode 3, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/video/52394563612/NITV-On-The-Road-Saltwater-Freshwater-S2013-Ep3-Th>.

⁶¹“Munkimuk,” *Social Shorthand, Real Talk: RealTalk The Book*, accessed October 3, 2019, <https://social.shorthand.com/RealTalkTheBook/n26lk6fSkAc/munkimuk>.

Baker Boy has similarly been involved with the Indigenous Hip-Hop Projects, an artist collective working to empower remote Aboriginal communities. As he told an interviewer: "They see me as a role model, [I'm] going to communities and they spin out that 'this guy's rapping in language and it's amazing' ... What I'm trying to tell them is, we can use our traditional culture."⁶² Like Briggs's "The Children Came Back" and other examples discussed above, the video clip for Baker Boy's "Could 9" foregrounds the theme of community, featuring family members—particularly children—dancing their way around his coastal Arnhem Land community of Milingimbi.

The visual focus on Baker's homeland community in "Cloud 9" is representative of another common feature of Aboriginal Hip Hop: Rappers' connection to land and spirit. There is an abundance of examples in the music of Aboriginal rappers that integrate Aboriginal spirituality and connection to country. MunkiMuk (1999) and Birdz (2013) directly reference Aboriginal spirituality in their songs entitled "Dreamtime." Briggs acknowledges the significance of the Dreaming in Aboriginal cultures in his song "Purgatory (Let It Go)":

[Verse 1: Briggs]

We carry our demons, We carry our beatings

We carry our dead to the earth and send 'em back to the dreaming

Jimblah also expresses a spiritual connection to his Aboriginal ancestors who have occupied country for more than sixty thousand years:

[Verse 2: Jimblah]

Story telling in my blood

I feel the presence of 60,000 plus years

My ancestors roamed this desert landscape

From the tropics up north to a snow-capped mountain peak

I'm mentally scarred from the bloodshed in the past

But I been fighting fire with fire since the day I was born

Here, Jimblah references the orality, mobility, and firing practices of Aboriginal cultures (and implicitly the Dreamings that inform them), ancient ancestry, and transgenerational trauma in a single verse. This juxtaposition positions his own Hip Hop practice as a postcolonial extension of Dreaming traditions.

Musically, Baker Boy's "Cloud 9" features the sound of the yidaki (didgeridoo) throughout each verse. This is in keeping with a tradition of incorporating traditional Aboriginal instruments and singing styles into Hip Hop that goes back at least to the 1990s. Munkimuk's (1999) "Dreamtime," The Last Kinection's (2011) "Yawar-Gu," and AB Original's (2016) "Take Me Home (Featuring Gurrumul)" are just a few other

⁶² Vanovac, "Arnhem Land Performer."

examples. As well as pre-invasion traditions, Aboriginal Hip Hop frequently makes reference to musical traditions that have developed in Aboriginal communities more recently. This is particularly the case with reference to country and reggae music.

Since the 1950s, country music has been popular in Aboriginal communities and reggae music had become widely popular by the late 1970s.⁶³ Aboriginal rappers often acknowledge reggae and country influences absorbed during their childhood, as these styles of music often share themes of dispossession and itinerancy.⁶⁴ Reggae is a recurring style in many works of The Last Kinection, such as “Happy People,” “Small Stuff” (2011), and “Commercial” Radio” (2008). “Black and Deadly” was later reworked to include a reggae groove in 2012. Darah’s song “Rebel” was inspired by reggae icon Bob Marley, as well as Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti:

[Chorus: Darah]

*Recognise, I’m a rebel for the cause
Fight to the end I put it down for my squad
Never back down, man you know I stand tall
Cause they can stop one, but they can’t stop us all*

[Verse 3: Darah]

*Y’all can’t harm me I fear no army
soul rebel original like Bob Marley
Music is the weapon like Fela Kuti
Y’all wanna stop me y’all gon’ have to shoot me*

Channelling country and reggae influences, acoustic guitar was a recurring instrument in early Aboriginal rap music and has been a defining feature of the genre. Tony Mitchell details earlier Aboriginal rappers who include acoustic guitar, such as Hip Hop pioneers MunkiMuk, Wire MC, Brothablack and also “political femcee” Jakalene Extreme. Munk talks of the influence of guitar:

More of the Aboriginal Hip Hop artists are into playing their instruments, especially didj. Remember, with Aboriginal culture, our aunties and uncles have been raised on country music ... All of us have grown up listening to that sort of stuff, from the elders.⁶⁵

Mildura rapper Philly’s cover of “Three Little Birds” by Bob Marley is a potent example of this tradition. In addition to Philly’s use of acoustic guitar and invocation of reggae music and ideology, the rapper asserts a distinctly postcolonial Aboriginal identity in his performance:

[Verse 2: Philly]

⁶³ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds*, 44–50.

⁶⁴ White “Rapper on a Rampage,” 127.

⁶⁵ Mitchell, “The New Corroboree,” 23.

*Look I'm feeling complete with Nike's on my feet
But I still feel connected to the land underneath*

Here Philly uses the symbolism of Nike shoes to express connection to Hip Hop fashion whilst acknowledging his spiritual and physical connection to country as an Aboriginal man. In so doing Philly asserts that engaging with artefacts of consumer culture does not compromise his Aboriginality. Though not always as explicit, this assertion is an almost ubiquitous feature of Aboriginal Hip Hop.

Globalizing Aboriginality

The social environment in which Aboriginal culture is reproduced has long included global markets, electronic media, and a settler-colonial dominated democratic state. These things form part of the everyday in which Aboriginal Hip Hop is practiced, giving expression to a variety of Aboriginal identities, stories, struggles, and visions of the future. At the cultural interface, Aboriginal rappers have tended to navigate the intersection of Hip Hop and Aboriginal traditions with careful reflection on their own positioning in relation to Aboriginal identity and the dominant discourses of the American, global, and Australian Hip Hop scenes.

As we have sought to demonstrate with the examples cited above, Hip Hop is an ideal medium for the production of Aboriginal cultural artefacts and events that reflect the global connections that Aboriginal people have made over the last few centuries. Aboriginal Hip Hop is, often self-consciously, positioned as an extension of a long postcolonial tradition of engagement with black transnationalism, seeking solidarity in struggles against oppression. It allows for the incorporation of pre- and post-invasion Aboriginal traditions and offers a space for the production and distribution of discourses relevant to Aboriginal peoples that are easily accessible, especially to Aboriginal youth. As we have sought to demonstrate, the discourses that circulate in Aboriginal Hip Hop continue to construct Aboriginal people as connected to country while facing the realities of colonialism head on. Hip Hop has become a useful medium for Aboriginal people to articulate a vision of the future wherein their children thrive and Aboriginal nations stand strong and proud as equals among the peoples of the world.

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