"RAPPER ON A RAMPAGE": Theorising the Political Significance of Aboriginal Australian Hip Hop and Reggae

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Abstract

Hip hop is a powerful vehicle for the expression of identity and resistance in contemporary Aboriginal popular music. This paper examines the origins of Aboriginal hip hop and explains the reasons for its cultural and political significance. By looking at the influence of reggae in Aboriginal hip hop, especially in the work of CuzCo (Wire MC and Choo Choo), it locates hip hop's history in terms of the reggae tradition in Aboriginal popular music, represented here by the work of No Fixed Address in the early 1980s. In this way hip hop is understood as part of a longer history of Aboriginal transnationalism. The paper seeks to understand how and why transnationalism is such an important element of Aboriginal political expression. It concludes by arguing that transnationalism represents a speaking position from which Aboriginal Australians can negotiate the cultural hegemony of the state.

Introduction

This paper argues that hip hop provides Aboriginal Australians with a language for the articulation of Aboriginal identity based on the valorisation of blackness. This kind of language has, arguably, been absent from debates about race in Australia which have, instead, taken place using a non-confrontational language which reaffirms the dominant status of white culture. Hip hop enables Aboriginal Australians to articulate resistance, identity and a sense of cultural survival.

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Aboriginal Australian hip hop is at once international and local. On the one hand, it is derived from an indelibly African-American form. Aboriginal Australians, like most of the world, were introduced to hip hop in the 1980s through seminal acts like N.W.A. from Los Angeles and Public Enemy from New York. On the other hand, the particular use of the hip hop form by Aboriginal artists to articulate very local concerns and narratives means that hip hop can be seen as having "always been" a part of Aboriginal culture (Wire MC 2007).

Discussions about the political significance of Aboriginal hip hop have suggested a degree of tension about the relationship between the local and the international. Questions have been raised about the equity of the relationship between Aboriginal Australian culture and African-American culture. This paper proceeds by arguing that Aboriginal Australian hip hop needs to be understood not in the context of a singular transnational exchange (with African-American culture), but in the context of a longer series of exchanges. It argues this through an examination of Aboriginal reggae music. It examines the work of No Fixed Address as representative of Aboriginal reggae culture. Understanding Aboriginal hip hop in this way suggests that its political significance emerges as a *function* of its transnationalism (rather than in spite of it). It suggests that Aboriginal hip hop does not represent a one-sided exchange. Rather it represents a *conversation*. A conversation, by definition, takes place between participants who are at once equal and consenting, but who also recognise each other's difference. A conversation is a plural space (Arendt 1998: chapter 6). It represents an *enabling* "framework of articulation" (Ivison 2002: 102). It enables Aboriginal Australians to *appear* in the world, to be politically present.

This conversation between Aboriginal Australian culture is especially important because, as Lionnet and Shih argue, "minority subjects" have, "more often than not… identif[ied] themselves in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-à-vis each other and other minority groups" (2005: 2). In this context they have been, as Duncan Ivison argues, "denied just terms of association" (2002: p. 97).

Part One: Aboriginal Australian Hip Hop

When the Newcastle-based hip hop group Local Knowledge was awarded the 2005 Deadly Award for Best New Group, it was a very public sign that hip hop was a significant force in contemporary Aboriginal popular culture. Its influence had spread from the metropolitan cities and regional cities to the most isolated communities. As the Sydney based Wire MC, from Bowraville on the North Coast of New South Wales, described it:

> I'll get to somewhere like Yirrikala (up in the top end, the Northern Territory, right up in the Gulf of Carpentaria) and some of the people wonder if anyone is going to [have] heard of hip-hop. And you go there and these kids are doing breakdance moves from the 80s, they are so old school. I ain't taking hip-hop to places it ain't. Hip-hop is taking me to places it already is (2007).

African-American Origins

Aboriginal hip hop bears many traces of an exchange with African-American culture. Aboriginal hip hop artist Lex Beckett explains this influence in the following way:

> 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 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 (in Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, 2004: 123).

Wire MC makes a similar point:

> Man!! What really grabbed my attention was N.W.A saying "Fuck the police!", you know that was something, when that song came out, when hip-hop was starting to be heard – even though people didn't want to listen to it – 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. We were stolen by the policeman, we were taken away by the policeman, we were rounded up and impounded by the policeman. So we were sort of conditioned to not rebel against that in such a public way, like screaming out "Fuck the police!" So that attracted me to it because they were saying things that we couldn't say, but we wanted to say (2007).

The exchange with African-American culture associated with hip hop has been widely celebrated by Aboriginal Australian artists. As Weno, from Local Knowledge (now Street Warriors), states: "African-Americans are very strong people, and we identify

with them, and we've picked up a lot of the stuff they've done, and what they are doing is phenomenal…" (2007).

At the same time as the exchange with African-American culture has been celebrated, there has also been a degree of scepticism and anxiety about embracing African-American culture in an uncritical way. Fears of cultural imperialism and the loss of local knowledge are widespread, especially amongst Aboriginal elders.[2] Munkimuk, a senior statesman for Aboriginal hip hop culture and the presenter for the Aboriginal hip hop show on Sydney's Koori Radio, suggests that he has sometimes been called in to communities to address these kinds of issues: "Some of these elders get me into the communities because they don't like the way the kids are going with the American hip-hop" (2007).

Many Aboriginal hip hop practitioners are themselves very cautious of uncritically appropriating the consumerist and misogynistic posturing associated with the performances of masculinity by rappers such as R. Kelly and 50 Cent.[3] Wire MC, for example, is careful to distance himself from "guys like 50 Cent, who are promoting drugs and sex" (2007). Tony Mitchell also discusses the efforts of "MCs of Aboriginal extraction" to avoid "mainstream US hip-hop influences, especially bling bling and misogyny" (2007).[4]

Hip Hop's Aboriginal Origins

One of the ways Aboriginal hip hop practitioners have assuaged anxieties about cultural imperialism is to highlight the extent to which hip hop functions as a vehicle for the performance of Aboriginal culture (as opposed to African-American culture). The principal element of hip hop, in this respect, is its orality, its emphasis on storytelling. This is widely seen as contiguous with Aboriginal culture. Munkimuk puts it this way:

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[2] Re: African American cultural imperialism see Harvey Neptune (2003) "Manly Rivalries and Mopsies: Gender, Nationality a, and Sexuality in United States – Occupied Trinidad". *Radical History Review* 87(fall): 78-95.
[3] For a critique of masculinity in hip hop see Michael Eric Dyson (2007). *Know What I Mean*, New York, Basic Books.
[4] Wire MC discussed the relationship between African-American hip hop and Aboriginal hip hop at some length in a performance which took place at the Music and Place symposium. This can be heard in full through the TfC eAR as an MP3, available online:
< http://www.transforming.cultures.uts.edu.au/publications/e_audio_repository.html>

> Aboriginal language is never a written language; it's always an oral and visual language, stories being passed down through rituals, corroborees, song and dance. Yeah, hip-hop fits in quite well with that (2007).

Wire is even more emphatic: "Hip hop is a part of Aboriginal culture, I think it always has been". Weno, from Local Knowledge, states, similarly:

> There isn't one Aboriginal kid who doesn't like hip-hop because it's that oral communication that we're so used to over the thousands and thousands of years. And you can also dance to it, which is a bonus (2007).

Workshops

This view of hip hop, as reaffirming rather than threatening Aboriginal culture is evident in the widespread support amongst many Aboriginal hip hop artists for conducting workshops with Aboriginal youths. Weno says: "Yeah yeah, we do heaps of workshops all over the country" (2007). Munkimuk has "been running workshops with kids for a long time… [E]specially through the desert, up through the desert in Northern Territory, out in western New South Wales, up through Queensland, South Australia, WA." He says:

> For some of these people, English is like their fifth language, so I try to get them to do it in lingo. And there's a whole bunch of kids out there who are rapping in lingo these days, which you've got to love (2007).

Aboriginal Hip Hop's Reggae Origins

Another way of understanding the roots/routes of Aboriginal Australian hip hop is to examine its affiliations with Jamaican music. Traces of a Jamaican influence are audible in the work of many Aboriginal hip hop artists, including The Last Kinection (N.D.). Perhaps the most explicit example of this genealogy can be seen and heard in the work of Wire MC, both in his solo productions and also in his collaborations with Argentinean- Australian rapper Choo Choo, who perform together under the moniker CuzCo.

Wire MC traces the influence of Bob Marley on his work back to the fact that he learned to play guitar using a Bob Marley songbook. To this day many of his tracks are shaped around a guitar line. When asked (by Tony Mitchell) about his use of guitar in hip hop, he replies:

For me personally, it's not influenced by country music, it's influenced by reggae music; Bob Marley and The Wailers, Peter Tosh, influenced by Jimi Hendrix, influenced by blues, you know, bit of Living Colour, bit of rock 'n' roll (2007).

Wire MC, together with Choo Choo, also pays homage to Bob Marley in his lyrics. He references iconic Marley phrases on a number of tracks on the CuzCo unreleased Demo (2008). These phrases include: "catch a fire" (on track 1) from Marley's 1972 *Catch a Fire* album; "burnin' and a lootin' tonight" (on track 1), from Marley's 1973 *Burnin'*, "Lively up yourself" (on track 5) from Marley's 1974 *Natty Dread* and "Chant Down Babylon", (on track 1) from 'Come We Go Burn Down Babylon' on Marley's posthumously released *Confrontation (*1984).

To "chant down Babylon" is to "tell the truth", to speak truth to power. Babylon represents the oppressive power and its knowledge of the state. On a song called 'Babylon System' from *Survival* (1979) Marley describes Babylon in this way:

> Babylon system is the vampire
> Sucking the children day by day
> Babylon system is the vampire
> Sucking the blood of the sufferers
> Building church and university
> Deceiving the people continually (Cooper 2004: 206)

Thus, when Wire MC and Choo Choo "Chant Down Babylon", they confront the Australian historical point of view. In their work, Black History is brought to the fore. They tell the story from a Black point of view. They "turn the tables". Wire knows the power of this reversal. He raps: "Who's sorry now that the tables have turned?" While unafraid of violence, he warns "[I'll] burn down your house, spit fire and leave smoke stains"; his threat is also epistemological. He also warns he will "burn the *frame*" (2008, italics mine).

Link to audio sample CuzCo extract 1 – 0:26 secs   ▶

[To hear these MP3 audio samples, please make sure you are reading the document using Adobe Reader 9. This is freely available online at <http://www.adobe.com/products/reader/>]

By "burn[ing] the frame" Wire suggests that representational space is no longer fixed. It's malleable and porous in a way that allows for the coexistence of different kinds of history, different knowledges. It is in a passage about the recent events in Redfern, where the death of 17 year old Aboriginal man Thomas 'TJ' Hickey after being chased on his bike by police led to a response by local youth that was branded a "riot" in the media, that the potential of Wire's alternative "framing" becomes most apparent. Here, the "riot" is transformed into something very different, a "revolution". Using two Bob Marley phrases, "Catch a fire" and "burnin' and a lootin'", both album titles, Wire re-frames the "riot" in the context of an epic and historical struggle against injustice and oppression.

> Watch me light 'em up, lyrical Molotov
> Catch a fire, it's a riot
> Somebody call the cops
> Down on the Block they're burnin' and a lootin' tonight
> White man's property matters more than a black boy's life (2008)

Link to audio sample CuzCo extract 2 – 0:13 secs   ▶

Words are not Wire's only weapon. He also employs an aural politics, a politics of sound and noise. This is the case both in the structure of the music (its rhythm), and in its corporeality, its capacity to engulf and claim space. This emphasis on the politics of sound is evident in many musical traditions. It is the reason that the British prohibited the drum through the colonial empire. They classed it – correctly - as a weapon (Sublette 2004: 162-3). No one has emphasised the politics of sound as much as the Jamaicans in reggae. In the same way that a tropical low pressure system implies an imminent storm so too, foregrounding the low frequencies of the bass in Jamaican popular music suggests an imminent political storm.

Bob Marley understood the politics of sound when he sang about a "rhythm against the system". Similarly, on 'Bad Card', from the *Survival* (1979) album, he sings: "I want to disturb my neighbour". Here, music is not mere entertainment but ideological weaponry. It engenders a politics of disturbance and disruption, a destabilisation of the moral majority's complacent rhythms, disturbing the peace (Cooper 2004: 75).

In the work of CuzCo we see Wire employing this impulse in its most direct incarnation as he "claim[s] the land in the name of sound". The song, the first track on an as yet untitled, unreleased demo, concludes with a chant, which is repeated twice:

> What am I doin' where am I goin'
> Got to keep moving
> Won't be slowin' me down
> Watch me now burn this town,
> I came to claim the land in the name of sound…
> In the name of sound
> In the name of sound
> I came to claim the land in the name of sound (2008)

Link to audio sample CuzCo extract 3 – 0:26 secs	▶

By repetitively chanting the same line, CuzCo are literally "chanting down Babylon". They invoke the power of sound, music and rhythm to dispel (burn) Babylon and its myths and to liberate the (Aboriginal) people. Here sound is both a physical and an epistemological confrontation. It is a vehicle of understanding, which enables (Aboriginal) people to *see* the structures of power and knowledge which have alienated them from their land and their history. This chant fundamentally destabilises the status quo. It is designed to instil a sense of dread and "panic". Choo Choo recognises this when he raps, deceptively: "don't panic it's only a rhyme". The verse reads as follows:

> I chant down Babylon on the streets
> So I'm branded the most out landed
> Rapper on a rampage
> (Wire) It's a fucken' sound claim
> This is the sound of a twelve gauge,
> Mate but don't panic
> It's only a rhyme
> I'm not fanning the flames
> I've got Wire for that…(2008)

Link to audio sample CuzCo extract 4 – 0:21 secs	▶

Bob Marley's classic verse, where he invokes the power of reggae music to "chant down Babylon" comes from 'Come We Go Burn Down Babylon' on the posthumously released 1983 *Confrontation*. Here he makes explicit the relationship between burning and chanting. He sings:

Come we go burn down Babylon
One more time.
Come we go chant down Babylon
One more time.
For them soft, yes them soft,
Them soft, yes them soft.
So come we go burn down Babylon
One more time.
Music, you're, music you're the key
Talk to who, please talk to me
Bring the voice of the Rastaman
Communicating to everyone
A reggae music, chant down,
Chant down Babylon… (Cooper 1995: 124-5)

Reggae Routes

This argument, which frames the roots/routes of Aboriginal Australian hip hop in terms of its affiliations with Jamaican music, as well as African-American music, is informed by ethnomusicological research on the influence of Caribbean music on the emergence of hip hop in New York in the late 1970s and early '80s. Key sites of crossover included the Jamaica practice of 'talking over' an existing song or rhythm as a way of hyping up a dancehall crowd and an irreverence towards issues of ownership, highlighted by the Jamaican practice of recycling rhythms. These qualities endowed in reggae music a structural fluidity and open-ness which, in turn, provided a model for negotiating the exigencies of life in an impoverished New York. The centrality of reggae to the emergence of hip hop in New York is illustrated by Wayne Marshall, for example, who writes: "Reggae paradoxically disappears into hip-hop's vocabulary by virtue of its very centrality and ubiquity" (2005: n.p.). Tony Mitchell is even more categorical about the infuence of reggae on hip hop. He writes: "[Hip Hop's] origins [lie] in toasting and sound systems in Jamaica in the 1970s" (2006: 136).

Part Two: Aboriginal Australian Reggae

Framing the roots/routes of Aboriginal Australian hip hop in terms of its reggae affiliations also provides Aboriginal Australian hip hop with a more extensive local genealogy. We can trace its origins to Aboriginal reggae (as well as Jamaican reggae).

This is important because it illustrates the extent to which hip hop is deeply embedded in Aboriginal popular culture, as opposed to being a singular or aberrant phenomenon.

The most prolific period for Aboriginal reggae was the 1980s. During this period, as Peter Dunbar-Hall writes, it was "almost predictable" for an Aboriginal rock album to feature a reggae song (Dunbar-Hall 1997: 47). Aboriginal bands that utilised reggae, to a greater or lesser degree during this period, include Kuckles, Arnold 'Pudding' Smith, Joe Geia, Ulpanyali Band, Kulumindini Band, Blekbala Mujik, Broken English, NT Express, Soft Sands, Coloured Stone, Reggae Dave, Sunshine Reggae, Jbulani, Letterstick Band, David Dow, Frank Yamma, Chris Jones, Tjupi Band, North Tanami Band, Jalajirrpa Band, No Fixed Address and Mixed Relations.[5]

The Aboriginal use of reggae continues through to the present day. In 2004, for example, George Rrurrambu released an album entitled *Nerbu Message*. For twenty years Rrurrambu had been the lead singer for the Warumpi Band. Although they were primarily a rock'n'roll band, famous for performing in Aboriginal language, the Warumpi Band did record a number of reggae songs, such as 'Falling Down' from the 1987 *Go Bush* LP. *Nerbu Message*, however, was deeply immersed in Jamaican music culture from start to finish. One of its highlights was a version of 'Bangarang', a song originally recorded by Jamaican artists Lester Sterling and Stranger Cole in 1968, here re-titled 'Boomerang'.

Link to audio sample Boomerang – 1:02 secs	▶

The Politics of Reggae Music: No Fixed Address

Framing the roots/routes of Aboriginal Australian hip hop in terms of its reggae affiliations not only provides it with a genealogy in Aboriginal music, it also provides it with a powerful genealogy in Aboriginal politics. Reggae, that is, provided Aboriginal musicians with a powerful vehicle for confronting white Australia and articulating a political identity. Foremost amongst Aboriginal reggae bands, in this respect, was No Fixed Address. Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson describe the work of No Fixed Address, especially their most famous song, the anthemic 'We Have Survived', as "one of the

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[5] Many of these artists can be heard on *CAAMA 25 Year anniversary Compilation*, 2005.

first recorded Aboriginal songs to break away from the country/gospel canon… if not the first, certainly the most overt *politicisation* of Aboriginal music at that time [the early 1980s]" (2004: 47, emphasis in original).

The drummer, singer, songwriter and spokesman for No Fixed Address was Bart Willoughby. As he tells it, before he started listening to reggae his first musical love was rock'n'roll, especially Kiss and Suzi Quattro. However, his tastes were transformed when, in 1977, Graeme Isaac, who would come to play an important role in Willoughby's career (as the producer of *The Wrong Side of the Road*), took him to see Perry Henzell's 1972 Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* (Willoughby, 2000).

The experience of *The Harder They Come* made Willoughby reconsider his life in music. He was particularly entranced by a clip which preceded the film, showing a performance by Bob Marley and the Wailers. In an interview with Peter Parkhill in 2000 he said: "It [reggae] changed my life… [It was] the coolest version of how to play music ever created… I still believe that". He described Marley's work as "the most important music ever put on this earth". Listening to Marley, he said, "is about the closest thing you can get to being in the wilderness and figuring out how everything works" (2000). Now, whenever Bob Marley came on the television Willoughby…

> jerried to it. It was different, completely different to like Abba and Kiss and Moody Blues. It was really different! So I watched it. There was lots of things happening. There was lots of space. But what freaked me out was the drummer and the bass player. Just how cool it was… I was confirmed that the drummer and the bass player were the coolest black band in the world. So I watched it and bought [Bob's] albums. I just freaked out. It was powerful. I was thrashing the albums when I was about eighteen. I practised all the words, all the rhythms (2000).

Willoughby was particularly fascinated by the rhythm of reggae music. He said: "With reggae the rhythm is broken up and started again more or less - although it's deeper than that… I've never felt this deepness before". He also said: "I love the core of the one drop" (2000). Here he was referring to one of the highly distinctive features of Jamaican music. As Marc Veal describes it, with the 'one drop' drum pattern "the bass drum emphasised beats 2 and 4, the snare (playing mainly on the rim) alternately doubled the bass drum or improvised syncopations, while the high hat kept straight or swung eighth note time (2007: 32). To allow space for the stubborn 'one drop' drumming pattern, the

bass lines which emerged in Jamaican music became very 'open', consisting of "a mixture of rests and syncopations (as opposed to the continuous 'walking' pattern of ska)" (Veal 2007: 30-1).

Willoughby was entirely cognizant of the politics of the reggae rhythm. He was particularly attracted to its evocation of a sense of blackness. Through it he came to understand the extent to which rock'n'roll had been appropriated by whiteness, thereby erasing its black origins (Mahon, 2004). "Rock'n'roll is all white", he said: "It's 'fuckin' bullshit rhythm… It's theirs; it can never be ours" (2000).

While the rhythm of reggae was uncompromising, it was also beautiful. Willoughby described it as "art". However he also recognised a politics here, too. There was an implicit politics in the fact that reggae "is [so] beautifully structured in a place which is so violent". This moved Willoughby deeply. He recognised in its beauty a way of dealing with the harsh realities of black life in Australia. The "chaos" of life in Jamaica, he said, is the "same as Australia." (2000).

No Fixed Address: Musical Style

Perhaps the most prototypical reggae rhythm No Fixed Address ever recorded was 'We Have Survived'. The band recorded two versions of the song, the first on their eponymous debut, *Wrong Side of the Road* (1981), and the other on their second album, the EP, *From My Eyes* (1982). The version on *From My Eyes* (1982) starts with a long, one minute and thirteen second, introduction created by the thunderous, otherworldly bass of the didgeridoo, accompanied only by clap sticks. From the moment that the song starts in earnest, it is carried by the bass. The guitar is still there; however it's the bass which is pushed to the front of the mix. When Bart sings, in the first line, "You can't change the rhythm of my soul / You can't tell me what to do", he means it. His music is all about the resistance of reggae rhythms. For much of the song Bart plays a shuffling syncopation on the snare drum. For the chorus, however, he breaks into a militant 'one drop' rhythm, dominated by a cavernous bass drum. Here, the reference to contemporary Jamaican music is shouted from the rooftops.

Other elements of the music of NFA also worked to unmistakably reference Jamaican music practices. *Wrong Side of the Road*, for example, featured a (dub) 'version' of a

track called 'The Vision', called simply 'The Vision (Version)' (1981). The original version of the song is full of reggae references. It is dominated by loping basslines, syncopated drumming, skanking rhythm guitar and a sense of haunting created by reverb and hints of an echoing didgeridoo. This haunting reflects the song's subject matter, which is about people standing on the shores of Lake Victoria who see a "vision of the devil across the way". In 'The Vision (Version)' the lyrics are removed entirely. The sense of haunting suggested by the original becomes far more intense through the use of layers of echo and reverb. The track is also haunted by the ghost of a didgeridoo dropping in and out of the mix.

Some of NFA's tracks also channel Jamaican music through the irrepressible sounds of second wave, multiracial British ska bands like the Beat and the Specials. NFA ska tracks include 'Black Man's Rights' (1981), 'Greenhouse Holiday' (1981), 'From My Eyes' (1982) and (especially) 'Stupid System' (1982). These tracks were at once joyful and optimistic, but also deadly sharp, carried by a fierce rhythm. They represented the twin poles of life in the suburbs of the working classes. As Heathcott argues, the ska sound emerged out of the clubs of London and Manchester in the 1970s, guided by an aggressively multiracial youth culture that used ska, reggae and the Rude Boy image as "an idiom for social rebellion" (2003: 184). Gilroy also writes that ska had its origins in Marley's excursions into pop:

> The two-tone [ska] bands isolated the elements in Marley's appeal that were most appropriate to the experiences of young, urban Britons on the threshold of the 1980s. They pushed the inner logic of his project to its conclusion by fusing pop forms rooted in the Caribbean with a populist politics… centred on pointing to the possibility that black and white young people might discover common or parallel meanings in their blighted post-industrial predicament… The Specials song which topped the chart as the rioting of 1981 was at its peak asked, 'Why must the youth fight against themselves?' (2002: 226-7).

The hope of both British ska and No Fixed Address was that their music and their audiences would transcend racial categories. In an interview Bart declared: "I've perfected the best meeting place for white and black" (2000).

The Politics of the Lyrics of No Fixed Address

Bart Willoughby was acutely conscious of the power of reggae rhythms to confront the way in which popular music, especially rock'n'roll, institutionalised the cultural hegemony of whiteness. Indeed, this was perhaps *the* defining feature of NFA. They

confronted dominant white histories, which relegated Aboriginal history to the 'somewhere else' (the 'outback').

Nearly all of the songs on *Wrong Side of the Road* represented a refusal of White History, in which invasion and dispossession and a history of discrimination, poverty and police brutality were elided by a colonial narrative of progress. 'We Have Survived' spoke of a refusal to be "blinded" by this narrative:

> All the years that's just passed me by
> I've been hassled by the cops nearly all my life
> People trying to keep me so blind
> But I can see what's going on in my mind (1981)

Get a Grip spoke of the need to "get a grip on yourself or you'll never learn how to get to the place where you want to be" (1981). It became a national anthem for blackfellas in jail (Willoughby, 2000). 'The Vision' sang of a vision of the Devil calling people to "give their minds" and 'Black Man's Rights' sang of the dangers of "brainwashing".

> I am a Black Black man
> And I need to be recognised
> In this wretched world
> For we are getting brainwashed
> And the people forgetting about our rights
> So all you Black People
> You got to fight for your rights
> You got to fight for your rights (1981).

This determination to refuse colonial representations of history was also the dominant theme of No Fixed Address's EP *From My Eyes*. The title track spoke of the need to "have eyes", to "see" things for what they are, "so that I can fight for my rights":

> In this world you've got to have eyes
> Cause the people will try to blow your mind…
> I need the sunlight so that I can see.
> I need sunlight so that I can fight for my rights…
> I don't want to be blind,
> I want to be free (1982)

Stupid System spoke of the need for knowledge to confront the system created by the "white man's dreams". "If you do not know the ropes", Willoughby warned, "then you

have lost the battle anyway". 'Pigs', written by guitarist Chris Jones, attacked the moral authority of the "boys in blue":

> They kick you off the street
> They tell you to keep the peace
> They watch you like dogs on heat
> Unjustifiable police (1982)

'We Have Survived'

No Fixed Address thus worked to create a critically conscious space, which focused attention on the production of knowledge in a way which enabled people to *see* the whiteness of Australian ideology, especially its representations of Aboriginal Australia. The band also worked to transform these representations into stories of revival and survival. In this respect they were continuing a project which had been taking place in Aboriginal theatre during the 1970s. As Maryrose Casey writes:

> An important aspect of Indigenous theatre work was to break out of the frame [of Aboriginal representation] imposed by [social and government practices], not just for themselves, and for the education of Euro-Australians but also as examples of what was possible for other Indigenous Australians (2004: 60).

It was for this reason that the song 'We Have Survived' became the signature tune of Bart Willoughby (through to the present day). It also became the "black anthem" of the 1980s and a landmark in the history of Australian popular music:
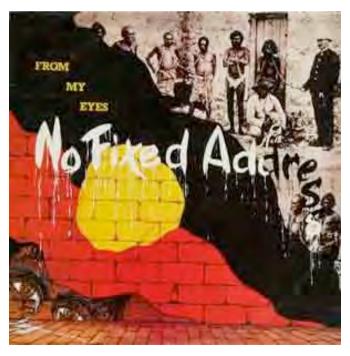
> You can't change the rhythm of my soul
> You can't tell me what to do
> You can't break my bone by putting me down
> Or by taking the things that belong to me
> Chorus:
> Cause we have survived the white mans world
> And the horror and the torment of it all
> We have survived the white man's world
> And you know you can't change that (1981).

Visual Style

The visual style of No Fixed Address also worked to re-imagine and reclaim the colonial history of dispossession and genocide. The front cover of *From My Eyes*,

designed by Johnny Cummins from Palm Island, highlights the history of what it means to have 'no fixed address,' to be dispossessed and alienated from your own land. The top right hand corner of the album features a photograph, circa 1900, of six bare-chested Aboriginal men dressed only in a wrap of material, chained together by the neck. The use of these chains was so common in nineteenth and twentieth century Australia that they were given a special name, 'black lace'.[6] The end of the chain is held by white policemen dressed in a heavy woolen uniform, and in front of the group, crouching, is a member of the native police with a dog. The backdrop of the image is a non-descript wall with no windows, only a door. The most moving feature of the photograph, what Barthes might describe as the "punctum", is the defiance of the men in chains (1982). They stand unbowed, with their arms crossed or hands on their hips.

Beneath the photo is an image of an urban mural, an Aboriginal flag painted onto a stone wall above a brick footpath. It is reminiscent of the contemporary mural on King Street, Newtown (Sydney). In the corner, looking through a break in the wall at ground level, is a larger than life image of the face of an Aboriginal man or woman, whose tears soak the ground of contemporary, urban Australia. Here the anguish created by the history represented in the first image is made clear for all to see.

No Fixed Address, *From My Eyes* **(1982)**

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[6] 'Black lace' became the name of a very influential rock band from Redfern in the late 1970s.

On the inside sleeve of the album we are presented with a third stone wall. This time it is a black and white photograph of the six members of the band. The comparison with the men in black lace (chains) on the album's cover is clear. Both show a group of six aboriginal men with their backs 'up against the wall'. However now the scene is set in contemporary Australia, and the band is looking at home in the urban environment. Their narrative is clearly one of survival. Their clothes and shoes (most are wearing sneakers, denim jeans and/or tracksuits) imply functionality, speed and movement. Their informality represents a tactic for negotiating urban space and urban life in an irreverent, counter-hegemonic way.

This informality extends to the materiality of the image itself. The edges of this photograph are ripped. It appears as a fragment which has been torn from a larger whole. There is an irreverence towards the image at work here which resists the narrow constraints and timeless-ness of realist representation. Its dissonance, unruliness and dissent destabilizes the transparency of the image and reminds us that it has a history. It infers that history, too, has a history, one that needs to be rendered visible and subject to intervention. The performativity of this image, that is, opens up a field where alternative narratives of black culture can emerge.

No Fixed Address (1982)

It is the very urban-ness of the style of No Fixed Address, however, which is perhaps its most significant aspect. Their obvious comfort in the urban environment, their inimitable swagger, emphatically places the idea of blackness in urban space. In this

way they confound the idea that Aboriginal history lies somewhere else, 'outback'. They aggressively refuse the place relegated to Aborigines in Australia. As the playwright Jack Davis stated in 1984; "To confront white and black audiences with a truthful uncompromised picture of urban Aboriginal life is in itself political" (Casey 2004: xxi).

This instatement of blackness in the urban environment was also one of the key features of the film *Wrong Side of the Road*, released in 1980, which gave a semi-biographical account of No Fixed Address. The film was nominated for Best Film and Best Original Music Score and winner of a Jury Prize at the Australian Film Awards in 1981. As Lawe Davies writes: "It was undoubtedly *Wrong Side* which began to move the idea of 'blackness' into the urban discursive field… The value of the film was that it enunciated a new urban politics, a new swagger, in the style of an internationalist black roots movement" (1993: 252).

Cover of the soundtrack album to *Wrong Side of the Road* (1981)

The Name: No Fixed Address

The name of the band ('No Fixed Address') was another tactic in their strategy to confront and displace dominant white representations of Aboriginal identity. Being homeless, having No Fixed Address, has been a very real experience for Aboriginal Australians. The irony of the homelessness of Aboriginal Australia is that it is founded on an overriding emphasis on the idea that it is the white settler who belongs; who owns the land, who is at home. Indigenous leader Garralwy Yunupingu has pointed to the

situation in which it is those inveterate wanders, the European immigrants who have crossed oceans and strayed far from their homelands, and who continue restlessly to roam and wander within the continent, who have been named the settlers, those who stay at home (Curthoys 1999: 14).

Aboriginal Australians, meanwhile, were forced into a position in which they became trespassers on their own land. This situation was only exacerbated by the Mabo decision and the subsequent *Native Title Act (1993)*. Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes:

> Pursuant to the Mabo decision and the subsequent *Native Title Act (1993)*, Indigenous people have in effect become trespassers in our own land until we prove our native title… According to this regime it is Indigenous people who belong nowhere unless they can prove their title according to the criteria established by the state. Those who are unable to demonstrate ritual, ceremonial and the exercising of continuous rights in land do not belong anywhere other than to be positioned within a discourse of citizenship that seeks to erase dispossession through privileging white sameness over Indigenous difference (2003: 39).

This logic has condemned Aboriginal Australians to a history of displacement and migration, many (such as Bart Willoughby's father) being forced on to camps and missions a long way away from their traditional lands. Many were subsequently forced to move to the city in search of work (Morgan 2006: 45-48). Adding insult to the injury created by this cruel history has been the way in which the mainstream reception of 'Aboriginal-ness', from land-rights claims to literature, theatre and music have been 'framed' by an exclusive notion of Aboriginality as based on an uninterrupted connection with their original lands. This reading of Aboriginality, Casey writes, "presented very tangible obstacles" (2004: 14).

Just as 'We Have Survived' transformed a history of colonialism into a story of courage and survival, so too the name of the band, No Fixed Address, transformed this history of homelessness into a site of refusal and tactical resistance. Their name can be read as a refusal to be fixed in place, to be named by white history. As Analisa Oboe writes, in a reflection on the work of Mudrooroo;

> If names are used to enforce identity, authority and submission, then playing with names can become… a means of rejecting the imposition of roles, of behavioural patterns, and of definition (2003: 8).

There is more than just an act of rejection at work here, however. The rejection of a name is also an act of reclamation. As Derrida writes:

> By disseminating or losing my own name, I make it more and more intrusive; I occupy the whole site, and as a result my name gains more ground. The more I lose the more I gain (Oboe 2003: 8).

No Fixed Address were also drawing on a long history of themes of dispossession and itinerancy in Aboriginal popular music, especially country music. While many of these songs were laments - Herb Laughton, for example, wrote 'Ghan to the Alice' while on the road looking for his mother after being taken by the government as a child (Walker 2000: 63) - many others transformed the alienation and displacement foisted on Aboriginal Australians by a history of colonialism into a source of masculine pride. The great Vic Sims, for example, transformed the experience of being a 'Stranger in My Country' through a very funky rhythm track and horn section that was at once uplifting, ironic and confronting (*Buried Country*, 2000). Mudrooroo, who wrote widely about the difficulties of finding a single definition for the idea of Aboriginality, suggests that this kid of machismo featured throughout country music. He writes:

> The whole gamut of an itinerant life was romanticised in country music through the cowboy/stockman. Popular subjects in Aboriginal country music included horses and cattle, drinking, gambling, the outsider as hero, a nomadic existence, country-orientation, wronged love, fighting and fucking (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2004: 102).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the political significance of Aboriginal Australian hip hop is that it provides a language for the articulation of identity based around the valorisation of blackness. The language of Aboriginal Australian hip hop draws not only on African-American culture, but also Afro-Jamaican culture and, more importantly, Aboriginal Australian cultures of transnational engagement, represented here by Aboriginal Australian reggae. In this way this paper provides an important local genealogy for Aboriginal Australian hip hop.

This genealogy suggests that just as Wire MC argues, hip hop has "always been" a part of Aboriginal culture, so too Aboriginal culture has "always been" transnational. This

emphasis on transnational exchange as a site of Aboriginal resistance has been identified by a number of writers.[7] The political power of sites of transnational exchange has been defined by Lionnet and Shih as a function of the way in which it negotiates the colonial hegemony of the nation state (2005). According to this argument Aboriginal Australian hip hop can be understood as a conversation between Aboriginal Australian culture and African-American culture (and Afro-Jamaican culture). The political significance of this is the way in which, as a conversation, hip hop creates a plural space which enables Aboriginal Australians to appear in the world, to be politically present, in a way which has been denied to them by the conditions of exchange imposed by the white colonial state. According to this argument, the political significance of Aboriginal Australian hip emerges because of, rather than in spite of, its transnationalism.

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[7] For more extensive research into Aboriginal Australian transnational engagement see John Maynard (2007) *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism*. Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press; John Maynard (2005) "Transcultural/transnational interaction and influences on Aboriginal Australia." In *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, edited by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake. Canberra: ANU E Press; Kathy Lothian (2005) "Seizing the time: Australian Aborigines and the Influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969-1972." *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 4: 179-200; Gary Foley (2001) "Black Power in Redfern 1968-1972." Available online from <http://koriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html>.

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