Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes
Hip Hop Down Under Comin’ Upper

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Abstract

This thesis is my attempt to understand the processes by which social agents negotiate belongingness and being across vast geographical, temporal, ethnic, cultural and historical discontinuities.

In Sydney, Australia, in mid 1994, two middle class, educated white boys argue about something that they are calling their culture; a culture they call Hip Hop, most often associated with the rap music of dominantly African-American post-industrial inner-cities of the United States. A breach of Hip Hop etiquette has lead to a conflict, to be resolved in a radio studio, live to air, by a rap battle. At stake are a number of questions about appropriate practice: whether it is permissible, or even necessary, in Sydney, in 1994, to be disrespectful of other rappers, and thereby to reproduce what are understood to be the historical conditions of emergence of North American Hip Hop Culture, or whether the Hip Hop Community in this place needs to be nurtured, to be protected from such divisive, potentially harmful practices.

Laying their improvised rhymes over a slamming instrumental beat, the boys swap verses until one, beset by technical problems and hamstrung by his own deficiencies as a freestyler (he prefers to carefully compose his raps in the comfort of his bedroom) cedes, defeated by the weight of words and the ferocity of their delivery. The victor is able to assert, through his victory, the correctness of his account of just what Hip Hop is.

This thesis examines the context for this episode in order to develop an account of the processes by which these individuals and their various fellow-travellers authenticate their own claims to a belongingness to 'Hip Hop Culture', thereby coming to not only understand, but, I argue, to create their place in a 'post-modern', 'post-colonial' world.
This account moves through various levels of contextualization. I start out by detailing the battle, using that event and the discourses with which it was framed to mark out the thesis's thematic concerns. After a brief Introduction, outlining some methodological concerns, the thesis proceeds through four parts.

The first is concerned with the historical narratives and genealogies produced by the social agents in question, with which they authenticate their practices.

The second part understands these agents as being located within a complex world of what Arjun Appadurai (1990) calls 'global cultural flows', with which they engage in co-creative processes to produce meanings, discourses and practices.

Part Three discusses the various tropes for communality used by these agents to argue for a cultural substrate within which these meanings, discourses and practices are given coherence. In particular, the discourse of Hip Hop Nationalism is examined in the context of contemporary discourses of Australian nationalism and discourses of place.

Finally, the thesis moves in on (and moves to) the beat, accounting for this massive labour of cultural production in terms of embodied experience, wondering just what it is that is felt that becomes the grounds for making a claim to belonging to a Culture, a Community, a Nation.
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Maps

Australia

New South Wales
This map of Greater Sydney illustrates the approximate limit of urbanisation, principal railway lines, and marks locations mentioned in the text. The suburban spread of the city is limited to the north and south by national parks, to the east by the Tasman Sea, and to the west by the Nepean River and the escarpment of the Blue Mountains.

Although the cosmopolitan centre lies on the harbour (marked 'Sydney City', above), the demographic heart of Greater Sydney lies about 10 km to the east of Parramatta. The metropolis is currently encroaching upon the market-garden green belts to the north- and south-west.
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Introduction

“MCs should know their limitations...”

Souls of Mischief
“Limitations” from ‘93 til Infinity

Sydney, June 1994

High above the city streets, in a public broadcast radio studio, two rappers are about to battle.

A sinuous, looping bassline thumps through and around the small room, setting feet tapping and heads nodding in an absent-minded, meditative unison. Five bodies are here, alive with driving sounds and rhythms, the repetitive, visceral, gut-trembling riffs of a slamming Hip Hop beat.

Abruptly, with a flick of a switch, the room is thrown into a silence, a yawning sonic void just as tangible as the suddenly missing beat. From behind the console, the producer points an outstretched index finger towards one of the rappers, indicating ‘you’re on!’ We are live to air.

The rapper, a clean-cut, t-shirted youth of about sixteen years of age, moves closer to the microphone in front of him. The muscular rhythms register visibly in the boy’s body as he concentrates on the regular, tinny ticking of the beat, now only just audible to the rest of us through the padded cuffs of the headphones clasped to his ears. He nods his head, the motion building, spreading into his shoulders, until his whole body seems to quiver with a growing electric tension, stretching and reaching for the beat. Then, a sudden release: at once, the rapper is the beat, snapping into a rhyme, the first move in the battle.
He starts to rap.

*Here we are at 2 S. E. R.*
*I’ve got J.U. on my right*
*I didn’t want to diss him,*
*But I did right!*?

This rapper calls himself Mick E. In an inflammatory breach of Hip Hop etiquette, Mick E and his DJ, E.S.P., had recorded a rap in which the ability, or *skills*, of certain other rappers and local Hip Hop personalities had been questioned, insulted, *disrespected*. One of the targets of this *diss* had been The Urban Poets, J.U.’s crew. And J.U., staring daggers from the second microphone to Mick’s right, has sought redress.

Hence the battle.

Mick E *steps* to the issue defiantly, without apology, confidently emphasising the third beat of each measure, delaying the final, rhetorical syllable of the opening quatrain (“right”) so as to allow it to fall on the stressed backbeat. Having established the regularity of the beat, Mick subtly alters his rhythm, happy to anticipate and fall minutely behind the strict pulse, running together some syllables, drawing others out, free within the rhythmic structure to semantically shade his delivery as he moves into an explication of and a justification for his actions.

—*because I was gettin’ down*

*With the hard core*

*Hard core is the shit:* to claim to be “down with the hard core” is to assert your Hip Hop credentials, your *authenticity*, in the strongest possible terms. To *kick reality*. To *be true* to Hip Hop.

Mick has started to construct an argument, using a slowly descending tonal pattern arriving at the words ‘hard core’. These two syllables are drawn out, marked less with a strictly observed rhythmic stress than with a carefully weighted, almost sneering inflection over almost a full measure each. Mick lets everyone
savour the weightiness of the words, and with a confident swagger in his voice, sets up a tiny anticipatory space within the metrical field for the next line.

\[
I \text{ got...}
\]

Mick's attack into this line is brought up short. He appears to be momentarily nonplussed, stopping in mid-flow, his body dropping out of its rhythmic ease and into a frozen attention. A crisis registers on his face the barest split second later. He hesitates and loses momentum.

\[
\ldots \text{ lost the beat, for sure...} \\
\text{Where's the beat gone?} \\
\text{It's outta my headphone} \\
\text{I wanna kick to you} \\
\text{I was talkin' to you on the phone}
\]

The backing track has apparently disappeared from Mick's headphones, leaving him stranded without a rhythmic pulse. He loses the line of argument he was developing, and turns to the crisis at hand to keep his rhyme going, gesturing frantically to Miguel, the console operator, to get the beat back.

Responsible for having initiated this battle, and having been given the first use of the microphone, Mick is under some pressure to keep up his flow. Now, drawing on the still warm body-memory of the rhythm, he kicks out a series of raid fire triplets: "kick to you", "talkin'-to", "on-the-phone", flattening out the syllable "phone", into a nasal drone, more Los Angeles than Sydney. He has recovered well; the beat returns, and Mick gathers momentum again:

\[
\text{You said that we started} \\
\text{some ill shit} \\
\ldots \text{The mike's gone...} \\
\text{What 'm'I gonna do with it?}
\]
But now another technical crisis: the microphone arm has started to sag, leaving Mick floundering just as he had recovered his flow. He is good enough to get a rhyme out, but only just, managing to squeeze the words in before allowing himself off the hook by passing the mike to J.U.:

J.U. take a diss to me . .
I wanna start a battle so we can get down
With the 2-SER dissin' shit
. . . J.U. rip it

By the time that he gets to his final line, Mick is struggling. The beat is failing him, and he slides and skates over and around it but without the playfulness and confidence that allows an MC on the flow to tease and cheat the rhythm before pulling it all back together in a finesse manoeuvre of rhyming dexterity. By the time he gets to “dissin' shit” Mick is almost simply talking. Annoyed, he throws to the other rapper, surrendering the initiative after only a handful of lines.

J.U. is hyped up. He is older, angular, rougher looking, head shaven, his eyes intense. As Mick stumbles and steps back, J.U. moves closer to his own mike, and mutters, somewhat ambiguously, “yeah . . . ill shit . . .” before, screwing his shoulders up towards his ears, and bringing his hands up in front of his chest, he starts to rhyme, chopping at the air with his hands as if turning the pages of a crazy book:

I flip skills at the kids all round the east
And say well yeh the boy is like he's / rising to the
occasion Caucasian that's right / yeah / breaking / graffiti
/ rapping DJing
That's the Hip Hop mike that we sort of rock not the dissin' bullshit because / I've got the skills on the mike
so wanna / flip with me?2

In contrast to Mick E’s laid-back, measured observation of the beat, J.U.’s flow is a breathless, headlong rush; a cascading of
words that ebbs and flows with each sharp intake of air, the pulse of the backing track only discernible in these momentary, fleeting pauses. Each phrase, defined by the length of breath, charts out a gradually descending tonal pattern, with extra syllables crammed in towards the end, pitching the rhyme forward towards cataclysmic crisis points as J.U. forces the last traces of wind from his lungs.

Where Mick E’s verbal play derived from slight anticipations and extensions of the strict measure of the beat, J.U. plays with the energy of his own delivery, marking significant words—“breaking/graffiti/rapping/Djing”—by isolating them in his flow before tumbling full-speed into the rest of his line.

And then J.U. really starts to flow. The chopping motion of his forearms and hands, as he lays out key ideas with pantomimic precision, gives way to a more relaxed, almost fluid rocking through his whole body, his hips swaying, his shoulders weaving through the flow:

```
yeh that's it . . . sorta loose-and-limber
Then you better quiver
When you then remember
That you shouldn'a come slanging that shit about the east
    and the city /
It's not that pretty
At The Lounge with my stylee /
I get wily / and then you know with my stylo
My pen and my blick I flick and then
My / lips go wrapping around the syllable again
A-verbalising, over the top of the horizon /
My friend you see this is off the top of my mind
I've got the skills I think that you can get a kick from the
    high g on ya behind.
```

J.U. rhymes by stringing together words through free-association, enjoying the not-quite-right rhymes: then/again, verbalising/horizon. He creates flows through the words, allowing
them to lead him off into unknown territory, unexpected rhymes, until he rounds up his ideas again.

And somewhere in there, as J.U. started to flow, the atmosphere of the room has started to change. Where, at the end of Mick E’s verse, both rappers were laughing at the drooping microphone arm, now there is tension: J.U. has raised the stakes, shifting from a playfulness to something more like anger. He suggests in his rhyme that Mick E’s diss was, in the first instance, not appropriate Hip Hop behaviour, and, second, not particularly well-advised, given his own (J.U.’s) superior skills as an MC.

And then it is back to Mick E again:

I'm comin' again I'm harder than the average norm
I'm blowing the horn I've got more flavour than the butter
    on a corn
I'm wicked here at 2-SER
I rock it out
The mike is hard I'm comin' it to you kickin' the clout
Cos I'm hard core
Harder than the city if the city's hard
You know that's not funny
That wack cassette
Harder than the boy in blue . . . kick it to you

Mick starts out full of confidence, meeting and matching J.U.’s intensity. He moves into a boasting rap, bragging about his own ability as a rapper, stressing his hardness. He is let down, however, by his inability to produce an appropriate metaphor: “harder than . . .” Nothing. After what feels like an age, but is only a split second, he manages to come up with what his body and delivery betray as a lame image: “. . . the city”. Mick has grabbed at the image from J.U.’s use of it seconds beforehand. The tiny, reaching pause before he lights on the word “city” is enough to throw him off his game, and even as he delivers the word, he realises just how weak it is. His rap loses confidence as J.U. laughs (again somewhat ambiguously), and his next line is a concession;
an admission that the dissing tape that has precipitated this confrontation is *wack*, before he again passes on the microphone to J.U..

J.U. does not miss a beat, literally. He launches into rhyme, throwing Mick E’s pretensions to being *hard core* back in his face.

*I’ll kick to you a rhyme about the hard core
That’s my man the Sabotage Organisation out there doin’ more
For the /Hip Hop cause than slanging all that bullshit
That only ceases to divide /
Yeah cos then you realise
That in my mind skills hide
They come out / on the high g in the morning
With Miguel / I rock it yeah I excel on 2-SER with my boyz /
Yeah, that’s it, we sorta kick it /
For you think that I’m slippin’
No because I am ripping / the microphone
Yeah I stand alone

Delivering his lines directly to Mick E, J.U. has worked himself into a groove, thoroughly enjoying his complete domination of the microphone, relaxing in his flow (“yeah, that’s it”) and then quickly moving to dispel any impression that he might be losing his flow by asserting his unique microphone technique. And then he pushes himself even further, moving in for the kill:

*You think you can fuck with this? /
I’ll fuck with you /
I’ll fuck with your crew
And I’ll swear on the air too

J.U. is going off, his eyes fixing Mick E with an unsettling steeliness, punching out the words that are now, unambiguously, a threat, relishing the harsh, fricative plosions, the illicit thrill of uttering the transgressive syllable, “fuck”, over the air. Uncertain
laughs, half-shocked, half overjoyed, ripple around the studio, bringing J.U. back to himself. He regathers, offering a general apology to the rest of us, caught in the verbal cross-fire:

_Sorry about that, peace to my homeboys behind the console /
Yeah I sort of rock it from my tonsils /
From my vocals peak up to Ben
With the Voodoo Flavor /
Yeah they're gonna guida sign got the shit that's gonna psych us
At ya grumba jack I'm comin' back no wack /
At the freestyle sessions at Lounge
We'll bring you sack filled of rhymes
And then we'll see who can kick it /
Not on the air but on the floor I got more yeah_

The battle is won; the rest of J.U.'s rhyme backs down, returns to matters of procedure. He sends a _shout out_ to a fellow rapper, Ben, from another crew, Voodoo Flavor, and spills out a _tour-de-force_ stream of syllables bordering on nonsense, rounding off with an advertisement for “the freestyle sessions at Lounge”, where, he suggests, more of this virtuoso rhyming might be heard; live, in the flesh, “on the floor”, wrapping it all up with a final promise (or is it a warning?) that he is not done yet . . .

But he has done more than enough for Mick E. The studio is silent, the backing track suddenly audible to all of us, leaking into the extended pause as Mick, now deflated, no longer the swaggering Mick E, but just a rather sheepish, chastened boy, steps up to the microphone again. Now his voice is disarmingly normal—_Australian_—free of rapper-boy attitude.

_I’m not meaning to get a head-swell
Wanna say what’s up to my man Miguel_

A brief pause, as Mick assesses his best move, delivering a final burst of rapid-fire syllables:
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Kickin' it behind the turntable
Spinning the discs . . .

He decides that enough is enough, and, and offers his capitulation:

. . . enough of that diss . . .

The battle is over.

Footnotes

1 My convention will be to capitalise and separate 'Hip' and 'Hop'.
2 Front slashes ('/') indicate breaths.
Making Culture

Because the social is made out of conflicting practically based views trying to practically shape social reality, the specificity of sociological practice cannot be to provide knowledge of a 'reality' that is often still in the making, but rather knowledge of the making of this social reality . . . Because it perceives social reality as the result of conflicting political struggles to create it, any sociology that consciously aims to resolve disputes in order to assert what 'reality' is, is merely a politics using sociological authority to try and create that reality.

Ghassan Hage "The Limits of 'AntiRacist Sociology'" in The UTS Review 1, 1 (August 1995): 61

Preliminaries

The episode between J.U. and Mick E recounted above took place live to air from the studios of public radio station 2 SER-FM in June 1994, towards the end of my research into Sydney's Hip Hop scene. This battle between these two rappers (or MCs) is the point of departure for my account of that scene, but not because it might be read as a defining ritual moment, a cockfight to be unpacked in order to reveal a structure, an organising logic of differences and oppositions from which I might be able to offer an account of a cultural object, or order, or essence surrounding, underlying or generating the moment. Instead, I will set out from this brief, five minute episode precisely because it was not a ritual. It was, rather, a moment that illuminates an intense desire to have a ritual, in order to have a culture. In negotiating the terms of engagement for this battle, the MCs can be understood as posing a question something along the lines of this:

Given that we, Mick E and J.U., are involved in a culture,
and that we are obliged by our commitment to that culture and to the ‘truth’ of that culture to conduct ourselves in a manner appropriate and authentic to that culture, what form should a ritual for resolving our differences of understanding about the form of that culture take?

Sarah Thornton, in her Bourdieuan analysis of the early 1990s English club scene as a ‘taste culture’, identifies three “overarching distinctions” through or with which participants in youth cultures determine “what is legitimate” (1996: 3): “the authentic versus the phoney, the ‘hip’ versus the ‘mainstream’, and the ‘underground’ versus ‘the media’” (3-4). The “cultural logics” of these distinctions build affinities, “socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture”, generating transient “ad hoc communities with fluid boundaries that may come together and dissolve in a single summer or endure for a few years” (3).

The participants in the scene that I looked at expressly denied this ad hoc ephemerality which Thornton perceives at the heart of the ‘club cultures’ she studied. Hip Hop was understood, by J.U., by Mick E, by Miguel, and the others, to be not merely a sub-culture, but a fully proportioned culture, whatever that might mean. This is at the heart of my own inquiry: how is the idea of ‘an underground’ culture, different to a perceived ‘mainstream’ sustained? How is this distinction made? What experiences and knowledges support such a belief? Mick E and J.U.’s battle offers a way into understanding a self-conscious project of the production of culture, revealed through a complex of contested, negotiated, and disputed knowledges, practices, desires, and, as Thornton only tentatively suggests, beliefs. Of course, the field of Hip Hop does not exist in hermetic isolation: these knowledges, practices, beliefs and desires are themselves enmeshed within a taken-for-granted meta-field of beliefs, knowledges, practices and desires: that concatenation of beliefs and knowledges Appadurai calls ‘the ideoscape’, and identifies with “the master-narrative of the Enlightenment” (1990: 10), and to which I will return.
Rather than constructing a linear account tracing origins and influences, my narrative of this scene will take a radial form: I want to approach an understanding of cultural flow, syncretism, disjunction, diaspora, mixing and so on from the perspective of the agents involved in this moment, who can only be at the centre of a profusion of discourses and practices to which they are variously and differentially exposed, and with which they are variously and differentially engaged. I am concerned not with the broad flow of History, but with the labour of individuals to furnish themselves with a history, a culture, tradition, an account of their belonging to something out of the multifarious, often regulating, disciplining, but also sometimes liberating, enabling institutions and interpretations constituting their fields of experience.

In the sense in which Lyotard (1986) wrote of the undoing of the sustaining meta-narratives of Western ontology, I want to suggest that this account is of the efforts of 'real' people to co-creatively negotiate meanings from a world that is, genuinely, phenomenologically, 'post-modern'. In fact, I want to suggest that in the cultural milieu I am looking at there is an experiential grounding for the inventory of recent theoretical 'posts', including 'post-industrial' and 'post-colonial' (see, for example, Appadurai 1990; Rose 1994b; Castles 1993). Andrew Goodwin, recognising that notwithstanding the superficial 'post-modernism' of late 1980s pop music, "the old ideologies and aesthetics are still on the menu", asks whether, in order to understand post-modern cultural forms, we need a postmodern theory (1990: 272). Similarly, I want to suggest that it is possible to understand the cultural phenomena I am describing without subscribing either to a celebratory theory of playful cultural promiscuity, of eclectic sampling and arbitrary mixtures (see, for example, Shusterman 1991; Wark 1992 and Costello and Wallace 1990), or to a post-modern theory which predicates a yearning for lost authenticities upon a nostalgic pessimism, and can only understand any contemporary claims to 'the real' as wistful simulacra. I do not want to mistakenly understand, for example, the use of the technology of the electronic sampler in Hip Hop compositional
practice as being indicative of a liberatory *bricoleur* sensibility (see Wark 1992); the Hip Hop scene I encountered did not consider itself to be an artistic or culturo-political *avant garde*, as I will show, instead espousing decidedly conservative discourses of Nationalism and Community. What might appear to be eclectic sampling is actually the product of carefully negotiated processes of interpretation and the making of distinctions in social practice.

This is not to banish ‘playfulness’ from my analysis, but to suggest that in practice play is often framed as being *serious*. Activities such as graffiti writing, break-dancing and rapping, for example, come to be endowed, by their participants, and often by theorists with a political stake, with antecedent, primal, causal dimensions, cast in discourses of ‘Culture’, ‘Knowledge’, ‘Truth’, ‘Community’, ‘Nationhood’, ‘Freedom’, ‘Blackness’ and ‘Political progressiveness’; discourses that operate to consolidate, legitimate and reify a range of adopted practices, practices that are, on other occasions, described as being, simply, great, fun things to do. This is not to deny the ‘serious’ side of these discourses and their effects; I just want to set out with a weather eye cocked towards the eagerness of left-leaning theory to enlist youth culture, and particularly those youth cultures ‘derivative’ (in whatever sense) from African-American forms, to a revolutionary cause, and which simultaneously erase the social agents themselves from the analysis.

Having promised to ground this account in the phenomenological, ethnographic ‘real’, however, I am already getting ahead of myself. C. S. Peirce wrote that there “is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out,’ namely, the very state of mind in which you find yourself at the time you do ‘set out’” (Peirce 5.416). Taking this as a guiding axiom, I want to suggest that there is no beginning to find here, other than in the accounts of beginning that are offered in the ethnographic present, as logics of necessity, as justifications for present practices, values, knowledges and beliefs. In unpacking J.U. and Mick E’s battle, it is of little use for me to determine an
'objective' truth of the past events in order to evaluate the merit of their relative claims: instead, I shall focus on their accounts of 'truth'.

Perhaps the best way to approach this work is as an attempt to (simply) explain this single episode, to understand, in simple terms, how and why two middle-class, well-educated, fair-skinned, Anglo-Saxon youths living in Sydney in the mid 1990s would be engaging in an exchange of improvised verses, derived from Afro-Caribbean-American oral practices, in an attempt to establish who, of the two, was being more true to this thing that they are calling Hip Hop Culture.

The Diss

Every Tuesday afternoon throughout 1994, between 2pm and 4pm, Miguel d'Souza, a 24 year old journalist and DJ, hosted a programme on 2 SER: The Mothership Connection, named for the George Clinton P-funk album of 1976, an LP which in the words of one recent historian of Hip Hop, "defined a whole funk universe" (Fernando 1994: 67). By the middle of 1994, Miguel, in addition to playing the latest North American, English and sometimes European (France's M.C. Solaar was gaining some popularity) Hip Hop releases, had embarked on a project of allowing young local rappers the opportunity to try out their skills on the air.

On this particular day in June 1994, Miguel had invited Illegal Substance, consisting of Mick E and DJ E.S.P., up to the twenty-sixth floor studio overlooking central Sydney for a chat about their recently released, self-funded, self-distributed, self-titled debut CD. I had also dropped by to see Miguel, and managed to record some of the proceedings on a small audio recorder: the battle and the conversations both preceding and following it. I had met J.U. on previous occasions, and subsequently met with Mick, E.S.P., Miguel and J.U. several times.
Miguel introduced the boys to his listeners: seventeen year old Mick, still a schoolboy in Sydney's well-off Eastern Suburbs, and twenty year old Steve (E.S.P.), who worked part-time in a chicken shop, spending the bulk of his time composing hard core beats on his sampler. Both lived with their parents.

Off the air the snaky, sensuous beat of one of Illegal Substance's recently recorded tracks wound around the room; a driving, metabolic noise that always seemed to fill the space between and around people wherever I went throughout my research. Miguel asked the boys about a rumour he had heard:

Miguel: I've heard a lot of stories about this 'diss' . . . what is supposed to be a diss. Has it been blown out of proportion?
Mick: Yeah . . .

On a later occasion, Steve and Mick played me this diss, catchily titled "Ain't That a Bitch". Not included on their CD, the track consisted of four rapped verses, one making thinly veiled reference to two other local Hip Hop crews, The Fonke Knowmaads³, and The Urban Poets, suggesting that they were, quite simply, not very good. Two other verses dissed one of Mick's old girlfriends and a couple of club DJs not involved in the Hip Hop Scene. The final verse was directed at Blaze, a central Hip Hop figure (of whom later). E.S.P., looking a bit uncomfortable in the studio, tried to put a bit of perspective on it: "we don't even mention their names in the song . . ."

Miguel probed the boys for details.

Miguel: Do you wanna talk about it?
Steve: . . . no, uh yeah . . .
Mick: We want to start battles . . .
Battles

To battle is to engage in a rapping (or break-dancing) contest.

I don’t want to rehearse historical arguments about the origins of rapping as a form of vocal delivery: scholarly and popular work on the development of various combative/playful African American oral practices—The Dozens, Signifyin’, Toasting, Boasting, Vouting, Talkin’ Shit—into the contemporary form abound. As these accounts stress, there were strategic benefits to be gained by slave populations able to appropriate and to ‘signify on’ (Gates 1988) ‘master’ tongues; a good signifier/toaster/rapper stood to gain prestige, status, physical gratification and fiscal reward for their skills in the social context of the male-dominated space of the street, ‘hanging out’ (Leary 1991). But it’s not (necessarily) all serious. Lewis, writing on Brazilian capoiera (1992), uses Kochman’s concept of ‘strategic ambiguity’ to account for the tension characteristic of many African-derived practices; that ambivalence of intention that allows a contest to slip between play and fight through the discretionary response of the players in any given situation. The encounter between J.U. and Mick turns on precisely this ambivalence.

So, the boys from Illegal Substance wanted to start battles in Sydney.

Mick and Steve knew, along with almost all the other Hip Hop-involved cast to soon appear in this thesis, understood that competition, and specifically battling, was part of the historical tradition of Hip Hop Culture; this knowledge was an integral part of the global folklores of that Culture. In the inner cities and recording studios of North America, raps and rappers took the performative discussion of their own skill with words as their most privileged theme from the very outset, while the question of dissing was foregrounded on Hip Hop album releases throughout the early 1980s, particularly through the brouhaha surrounding Roxanne Shanté (see Nelson and Gonzales 1991: 199-202; Toop 1991: 167-168), a near-legendary piece of backwards and
forwards recorded dissing that Miguel shortly afterwards referred to as the "Shanté phase". To again anticipate Appadurai's model for the analysis of global cultural flows, all these sources of material constitute components of the 'mediascape' informing the local Hip Hop scene, contributing to the 'ideoscape' within which the participants in that scene frame their knowledges, beliefs, desires, discourses and practices.

Miguel asked Mick to "flesh out" the diss, ('if you're gonna say it on record", he told him, "you might have to be prepared to back it up . . ."), and to explain the thinking behind it. Mick:

Yeah well what we're trying to do is, um, start battles in Sydney. I mean it happened in the States what, ten, fifteen, twenty million years ago . . .

With flamboyant rapper's licence, Mick charts out here an historical narrative that places "the States" at the vanguard of history, with the local scene trailing geological ages behind; as Mick explained to me later, the appeal of "American culture" was that "everything is so new there, everything happens there first".

Miguel agreed with Mick that "it [battling] is part of the African American Hip Hop tradition," but asked whether "it is necessarily part of the Australian Hip Hop tradition?"

And this is where Mick started to make a bit of trouble for himself. In Sydney, battling, and specifically the break-dancing contests that occurred particularly in the city's Western Suburbs in the 1980s constituted a central part of a collective memory, recounted anecdotally, or preserved as oral history in recorded raps and in locally published magazines. However, Mick made an assertion sure to put other noses out of joint:

There is no Hip Hop in Australia

What they (Illegal Substance) were trying to do, he continued, was to start this culture. An upstart, potentially inflammatory assertion to make, implying at the least that all those who had
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

tried to create Hip Hop or Hip Hop Culture in Australia beforehand had, well, got it wrong . . . Miguel, smoothing potentially ruffled feathers, offered a placatory qualification, suggesting that perhaps there was no "mainstream" Hip Hop in Australia, with Mick quickly agreeing that "it all starts underground and works its way up" (cf Thornton op cit).

Tradition

So, leaving aside the political problem Mick had just created for himself, here’s one way to make a culture: repeat the ‘original’ model. If we are to have Hip Hop, Mick is saying, we need to have the battles that took place in The Bronx, in Philadelphia, L.A.. We need to recapitulate, in a local context, a temporally and spatially removed series of events.

Miguel started to develop the question of the translatability of ‘Hip Hop Culture’ from its black, North American context to Australia:

in many ways you’re right, it [battling] doesn’t happen here, because what you’re talking about is battling, battling each other and challenging and maybe that doesn’t happen so often, particularly in an environment where it’s so friendly . . .

The conversation was inflected by what I came to think of as Miguel’s ‘organic intellectualism’; he had recently graduated from a mass communications degree, and his involvement in Hip Hop was informed by his own investment in ideas of ethnic and cultural diaspora. He was a point of dissemination of academic ideas about Hip Hop and youth culture into the local scene, a scene that took questions of knowledge very seriously.

For Mick, there was a fundamental obstacle in the way of such a recapitulation:

the Hip Hop Community in Sydney is all too friendly. . .
When Miguel suggested that this “friendliness” of the local scene was in fact a good thing, Mick replied that

we’ve got to take it, you know, further, steps further, so [we must] try and get the battles. We write a song about people . . . I mean we’re not saying we don’t like ‘em, but we just, um, pick someone who people have heard about, they’ll come back with a diss against us, also get our name out on their records as well.

So here is another way to make a culture, to start to create a sense of community: Mick wanted to create a vigorous, dense network of cross-references. “Get[ting] our name out on their records as well” is like shouting out or name-checking; repeated invocations of names, crews, neighbourhoods, creating the all-important sense of a Hip Hop community: This is the oral equivalent to graffiti tagging—a night out in the city, or an afternoon’s random travel through the city’s train system is organised around getting up: writing one’s tag in as many places as possible. As local Hip Hop acts started to release recordings, album sleeves and compact disc inserts would include extended lists of names, generically informed by recording credit lists, but in these instances labelled shout out to, or props to. When guests appeared on Miguel’s weekly broadcast the shout-outs were made orally; to omit somebody from a shout out could constitute a deliberate slight on that person’s status. As a result, shout out lists tended to be long, comprehensive, and take on an incantatory quality, as respect was paid to core members of the community. Additionally, Mick hoped that the layering up of cross-references provoked by his diss would yield the added benefit of furnishing the local scene with an episode, a chapter like the ‘Shante Phase’, that might come to constitute part of a tradition, further establishing, concretising, reifying this fragile local Hip Hop Culture.
Miguel suggested that a local Hip Hop scene need not recapitulate the chronology of African-American Hip Hop exactly:

Do you think that, I mean . . . that in Australia with Hip Hop being the way it is, and being produced by people from all sorts of different ethnic backgrounds, not necessarily . . . I mean in a sense there’s an opportunity here to sort of move it into a direction that maybe it’s never been before. I mean maybe in the same way that you have crews in South Africa and Japan and they’re not necessarily kind of adopting all the elements of Hip Hop Culture because they’re sort of creating a new one. Do you think that that’s a possibility here?

Here is the notion of Hip Hop as a global phenomenon, capable of transcending context to manifest in disparate ‘locals’. The Hip Hop Nation is frequently invoked in Hip Hop literature, and in the accounts of individuals describing their sense of belonging to a community that transcends national and ethnic differences. Graffiti writers, in particular, claim that their practices constitute grounds for friendship and shared experience across the world.

Mick, in response, agreed that the most important obligation that a local Hip Hop scene has is to produce its own styles. Contradicting his earlier assertion that there is “no Hip Hop here”, he conceded that Def Wish Cast had already started this process of marking out a distinct Australian Hip Hop Culture by “rapping with Aussie accents”. Here is what will become familiar as the Hip Hop discourse of self-expression: nestled side by side with the discourse of Hip Hop as global phenomenon is the predication of ‘truthfulness’, and therefore of (Hip Hop) authenticity, upon the grounds of the (Niggaz With Attitude) injunction to express yourself, of truth to one’s self, of being true to the music, to one’s own place. A writer, a rapper, a breaker was said to represent, through their practice, Hip Hop itself.
And so Mick moved on to a new argument in favour of battles. He conceded that the Australian Hip Hop Community need not necessarily slavishly imitate the American experience in toto, and even that Hip Hop-ness might manifest differently in this new context, might not follow the American model. However, Hip Hop still relies upon self-expression, upon this truth function. Self-expression—representing—relies upon practice: you must perform the correct genres, affect the correct embodiments, but you must do so in a manner that expresses your self at the same time. You must develop your style—that which marks your difference as a rapper, a tagger, a breaker, a DJ—and your skills—your expertise in those practices. And the best way to hone those skills, to work on your style, Mick argued, is through competition. Battles.

Enter J.U.

As Mick offered this account, J.U. walked into the studio, having monitored the foregoing discussion. He had heard about, but not actually listened to the diss directed at him by Mick, and had been standing outside the window of the studio, Mick told me later, staring daggers through the sound-proof glass. Miguel turned off the studio microphones, and the subsequent exchange between J.U. and Mick took place off the air. Once again, I recorded proceedings.

J.U. was furious.

His complaint to Mick was that the obligation to respect one's brothers in the Hip Hop Community must take precedence over the desire to compete. To commit a diss to tape constituted, he argued, lack of respect, and, even worse, cowardice. He told Mick that

what we're pissed about man is you can battle us anytime, I'll step now, anytime, anytime, anywhere, that's cool man. But put it on record, put it on a recording, it's gonna last man, and we'd never do that.
We'd never do that...

To *step* is to confront, face to face, to put one's money where one's mouth is.

Mick tried to justify his actions: "it's a way to take it [Hip Hop] further..." J.U. later told me that Mick's grasp of what Hip Hop *was*, and what it *meant*, was hopelessly "childish". He explained to Mick that

man, the way to take it further is to come with us and freestyle with us, kick any rhymes, any time, anywhere, that's cool man. But to take it further by dissing someone, that's not taking it further to me, that's counter-productive, especially when it's so small, man, 'cause it makes us angry, and we're not angry people. At all.

To rap *freestyle* is to improvise. J.U. was effectively upping the ante here, reminding Mick that battling, "traditionally", was extemporised rhyming, with the "test" of *skills* being the ability to think quickly, on one's feet: to *step*. And where Mick's rhyming practice was based upon careful crafting of written rhymes, J.U.'s skills were those of the improviser.

J.U. was barely keeping his cool. Afterwards he revealingly explained to me that

you have to try to remember that the Hip Hop Community, it's a fucking sensitive thing man, because you're dealing with egos, that's what rappers are man, they're egos... and what you try and go and do is... help to split it up more... We're upset about it... I mean, this is ill, we don't need this shit...

The first person plural refers in the first instance to J.U.'s crew, the Urban Poets: "we're not angry people... we're upset... we don't need this shit". J.U. was positioning himself, moreover, as representative of the "Community"; the "us" that had been upset by Mick are "all of us", the small, tight community that needed to be nurtured, that could not tolerate division.
The debate went backwards and forwards, with Miguel trying to mediate by offering an historical perspective that acknowledged cultural difference, suggesting that maybe here, in Australia in the 1990s, it might be possible to have a Hip Hop Culture in which these concerns can be negotiated, where "we" (Miguel, too, couched his contribution in the plural) would be able to abstract from an originary African-American Hip Hop Culture core values that might obviate the need to slavishly imitate the surface phenomena of the culture, those features that are context-derived, rather than necessary. Miguel's recapitulation of arguments he had already put to Mick met with J.U.'s complete approval; J.U. cannily aligned himself with Miguel's intellectual authority. Miguel explained:

... we live in an environment where our Hip Hop Culture that's here is actually, I mean what we're all kind of doing is create an Australian ... I've always wondered whether dissing would come in here, because playing the dozens is part of an African-American tradition, and none, or very few of the Hip Hop people here are from an African-American background. Their ethnicity is totally different and often dissing isn't necessarily part of everybody's ethnicity, ethnic background, so maybe that's why it hasn't happened here.

The conversation was winding up; J.U., having forcefully made his complaint, was prepared to accept a retraction from Mick, and a promise that the Illegal Substance boys would 'put a bar' on the diss recording itself. Things had been pretty much resolved, when a bombshell was dropped...

Mick, in the course of mumbling an apology explained that in dissing Blaze, J.U.'s friend and a central figure in the local scene, he had meant no offence to Blaze himself...

... J.U. heard nothing beyond the admission of the diss. "I can't believe that," he gasped (I mean it—he actually gasped). "You dissed Blaze? I can't believe that anyone could do that to someone who has done so much for the Community! Oh man, that's it!! We gotta step right here, right now!"
Mick accepted the challenge, Miguel dug around in his stack of records for a suitable instrumental track, and battle was joined.

**Defining Hip Hop**

So what do we have here? A radio studio on a winter afternoon; two teenagers, one Anglo-Australian (the rapper), one Greek-Australian (the DJ); a slightly older Anglo-Australian rapper; an Australo-Pakistani university graduate/radio announcer, and a post-grad researcher (Scottish-Australian), arguing about 'Culture'; 'Community'; 'Identity'; 'Tradition'; 'Respect'. What were they all doing? Simply this: they were trying to define Hip Hop.

In his freestyle, Mick claimed that he was, in dissing, "getting down with the hard core". To be hard core is to respect in one's practice the true values of Hip Hop. To be, rap Def Wish Cast, "true to the music". If there is a certain circularity or tautological quality in this formulation, it is because there is an assumed self-evidence implicit in the term. Mick's claim to hard core, repeated in a subsequent rhyme, is based upon his desire to battle, to prove himself as a hard rhymer.

J.U., in his second reply, offered an alternative understanding of hard core:

I'll kick to you a rhyme about the hard core;
That's my man the Sabotage Organisation
Out there doin' more for the Hip Hop cause

J.U. was telling Mick "I'll tell you what hard core really means". It means 'to do' for the "Hip Hop cause".

In his first verse, J.U. defined "the Hip Hop mike that we sort of rock" as "breaking, graffiti, rapping, DJing". The first three practices, break-dancing, graffiti writing and rapping, are the three core practices of Hip Hop, to which J.U. has respectfully added DJing; the art of turntable dexterity, of scratching and
mixing vinyl records on paired record players. These practices alone constitute Hip Hop, "not the dissing bullshit": for J.U. dissing stood outside the defining practices of Hip Hop, operating only to "divide". The continued performance of the true practices, their doing, was the proof of the viability and vitality of the local Hip Hop Community. The ability to produce a narrative of the maintenance of these practices in performance over an extended period of time (well over a decade) operated as proof that Hip Hop had a local tradition, and therefore a substance as an authentic, enduring cultural form, rather than being (merely) a fad, or (perhaps worse), a fashion. Further, the availability of historical narratives of the origins of these practices bound the local history of their performance to a global tradition transcending the local context.

Immediately following the battle, with evident satisfaction, J.U. offered the following précis of what had just transpired:

That’s an old, an old Hip Hop tradition isn’t it?

Miguel confirmed for his listeners that

If you’ve always wondered how people who listen to Hip Hop solve arguments and discussions and political differences that’s exactly how it is. It’s just the same as a conversation only it sounds better.

J.U. and Mick shook hands, making a show of having appropriately resolved their disagreement:

J.U.: Thank you boys for steppin’ up
Mick: That’s okay brother.

And that, supposedly, was that, although Mick later told me that he thought that the contest had not been fair, and that he had in fact rapped better than his adversary: his flow, he suggested, the overall relationship of his rap to the beat, had been superior to J.U.’s, notwithstanding the latter’s apparent ability to produce a greater volume of rhymes on the day.
That this battle took place at all, as Miguel’s summary above indicates, and as far as J.U. was concerned, served to affirm the legitimacy and sustainability of a local Hip Hop Culture, a Culture demonstrably authentic because of the observance of, and participation in, “an old Hip Hop tradition”. Its having happened was ultimately as significant as its material outcome.

**Winners write History**

And yet, having won the battle, J.U. spoke with Miguel for ten minutes, explicating for the audience his understanding, his vision, of the Sydney Hip Hop Community. He was involved, at the time that this interview took place, with Blaze, in opening a specialist Hip Hop record shop in Sydney’s business district. As J.U. had mentioned during the battle, the shop was to be called The Lounge Room:

> we hope to make The Lounge a little bit of a breath of fresh air, and make it welcome for everyone who’s down with the Hip Hop Culture, which as I said in the rhyme is, we believe, graffiti, break-dancing or graffiti art, break-dancing and rapping, and anyone else who’s actually interested in the music.

Having taken care to qualify graffiti as an artistic practice, J.U., perhaps with an eye cocked to his potential record-buying market (this interview was, after all, being broadcast), expanded the range of the Hip Hop Community from those actively involved in one of the three central practices, which, as he suggested, “we believe” is Hip Hop Culture, to “anyone else who is down with the music.”

> we want to make it ... it doesn’t want to be a place where there’s any attitude or anything. If you’re down with Hip Hop, if you’re down with the Culture, we hope to represent it truly, because there’s people out there in Sydney who don’t represent it fully and truly, and they’re not down with the Culture, and like that’s just the truth, and so we hope to represent it and a bit more of a focal point.
A Community must have a place. Even more particularly, Hip Hop is about neighbourhoods, about belonging, representing (Decker 1993); here, J.U. was embarking upon his own little piece of cultural strategy: locating himself at the geographical locus of Hip Hop. Having won what Mick had argued, and Miguel had confirmed to be the appropriate, authentic cultural ‘ritual’, and now speaking as representative of the Community, J.U. could start to ‘legislate’ the boundaries of that community:

I’ve heard the term sort of flipped “elitist” on me. That’s crap. Anyone that comes down that loves the music man, they’re down with the Lounge, and you want to be down with the Lounge to be down with Hip Hop . . .

Even Mick and E.S.P., both silent now, slumped back in their studio chairs, would be welcome:

we hope to see the Illegal Substance boys there bringing their skills to the battle with the whole crew, and that’s cool, because that’s the way that we do shit in the Hip Hop Community . . . you can come and battle if I’m behind the counter. Anyone who thinks they can rhyme can come up there any time of the day and battle, that’s cool.

J.U. was in full stride.

The thing is about Hip Hop, to us it’s a Culture. It’s not just the music . . . to some people it’s the music and that’s cool, they come as well, they get the music off us. Maybe they’ll see a bit of the Culture. Hip Hop is all those things that I said, it’s all integrated into the music. It revolves around or it might revolve around graffiti art, it might revolve around breaking for you. All that’s the culture for us and we’ll be living it and we’ll be hopefully trying to display different, you know, the different aspects of that Culture, representing it fully, and that means that we will be having . . . it’s not just going to be a record store, it’s gonna be, it’s a Culture, there’s a culture behind it.
There is a place for everyone in Hip Hop. The record shop represents it; J.U. and his friends will be "living it". And it is "all integrated into the music."

The Lounge Room would cater for all aspects of the Culture. Graffiti, for example

will be represented there. We'll be hopefully trying to cover that with some dope mags, videos and stuff. We might try to get some copies of the older videos on um you know new tapes and stuff and so we'll cover that aspect of it.

The shop will be a pedagogical institution, offering what amount to 'master classes' from two of the most renowned exponents of break-dancing in Sydney:

There’ll be a bit of lino there if you wanna break. There’ll be lino there for all the boyz from out west all the Def Wish boys. I hope that Simon and Matthew are—

. . . having dropped the big names, J.U. had to correct himself and use their tags . . .

actually Def Wish and Mr E—are giving free lessons.

To claim access to such personalities and to take care to extend the sphere of inclusion to "the boyz from out west", was to attempt to further establish the centrality of The Lounge Room to the putative Hip Hop Community, and to legitimise the right of those that speak for The Lounge Room to speak for all Hip Hop.
Tha Boyz: Subcultures and Gender

How young people, male and female, experience the society around them and how they in turn express this experience, continue to be immensely important questions.


J.U. concluded his account with a final invitation:

... so anyone who's down with our culture, come down to The Lounge Room we'll all kick it as brothers man if you're down with Hip Hop then we'll roll, you know ...

Miguel didn't let this slip past:

... and hopefully some time very soon, some sisters too ...

But despite Miguel's careful gesture towards the possibility of women's participation in the project of Hip Hop Culture, there's no way around this one. The Hip Hop world I encountered was for the boyz, a masculinised, even phallocentric world in which young men performed, rapped, breaked, boasted, bombed, leaving their phat tags to mark their presence, hung out, strutted, posed with their legs thrust out and their hands hooked in low-slung pockets, fingers brushing their groins. Where males talked about their Community, Culture, Nation.

In 1980, Angela McRobbie pointed out both the absence of studies directly addressed to female youth culture, the implicit masculinisation of the category 'youth', and the absence of reference to female behaviour (and experience) in the youth subculture literature. "In the literary sensibility of urban romanticism that resonates in most youth cultural discourses," she
wrote, “girls are allowed little more than the back seat on a draughty motor bike” (1980: 40). The domestic space of the family home, she argued, was completely missing from the ‘classic’ texts (Hall and Jefferson 1976, Willis 1978, Hebdige 1979); analysis did not proceed past the doorstep, a methodological bias perpetrated, she suggested, by a deep-seated leftist anxiety about the complicity of ‘the family’ with class oppression. There was a distinct lack of reflexivity on the part of the researchers, a failure to address their own “politics of selection” (39) which allowed a superficial identification of left-wing male researchers with working class males to pass without critique. These biases reproduced in the resulting analyses the patriarchal structures apparently invisible to the analysers in the first place.

By 1993, McRobbie, responding, she wrote, to the realpolitik of dealing with her own teenage daughter’s engagement with the rave scene, was reassessing her back-catalogue of polemic against the implicit (masculine) gendering of ‘youth’ in the sub-culture theory ‘classics’. Alongside a recognition of the “unfixing” or “unhinging” of the “traditional gender position” of young women in contemporary culture, McRobbie reads a fundamental shift in the nature of youth culture, dating from the late 1970s. “In fact,” she writes, “things were never the same after punk” (1993: 410); the distinction between ‘authentic’ youth culture and ‘commodified’ popular culture, demonised in the classic subculture literature, could no longer be sustained. Further, throughout the 1980s, “the increasing interest among a wider selection of the population in style . . . saw a situation develop where youthfulness became virtually synonymous with subculture” (410). I am particularly interested in developing this line of thinking, identifying what I think of as a media-driven ‘incitement to sub-culture being’ as being a key determinant in shaping the way that the people I researched understood their social being.

Theorists of youth culture have moved with the times; “class no longer underwrites the critical project of cultural analysis . . . ideology [is] also recognised as too monolithic a category
Analyses based upon notions of class and resistance carried with them the romantic discourses of 'authenticity' that McRobbie had earlier (1980) identified in the 'politics of selection' of the early Birmingham theorists: the selection of the working class lad as ersatz revolutionary vanguard, of (male) youth as the new Agent of History9. Such approaches were only able to read the processes of consumption in terms of discourses of 'commodification' and 'de-politicisation'. Witness the fundamentally pessimistic, depowering trajectory of the 'classic texts', in which gestures of youth resistance are always already re-captured by the all-encompassing logics of capital and labour: 'imaginary solutions to real problems' (see Frith and Goodwin's *précis*, 1990: 40).

More recently, McRobbie suggests, there has been an increasing alertness to "the more micrological level of dispute and contestation" towards what she calls, after Laclau, "the dignity of the specific" (1993: 410). In preference to an analytic orthodoxy in terms of which so much attention was put on the final signifying products of the subculture and the permutations of meaning produced by these images, that the cultural work involved in their making did not figure

McRobbie argues for an ethnographic approach in which the practical processes of selection, of interpretation, and of the reinscription of meanings are foregrounded (411). In which Hebdige's "semiotic guerilla warfare" (borrowed from Eco, in Hebdige 1978: 105) might be witnessed in practice, rather than as a *fait accompli*, as a fixed system or structure of signification (magically) in place, and available for analysis. McRobbie argues that only through an attention to process will the role of women in the making of cultures become visible.

Further, accounts rooted in synchronic relations, lend themselves to 'homology' theories: a semiotic snapshot, frozen in time, seems to 'be structured', yields reductive explanations. Because a
structuralist approach does not understand semiotics as an interpretive, social practice (or rather, because a structuralist semiotics reserves this practice for the privileged, panoptic analyst alone), social agents cannot 'appear' in analysis: they may be 'read' as texts, as images, but their accounts count for naught.

The phenomenological pragmatics of Peirce will help here; particularly his understanding of semiotics as a process of interpretation (see Weber 1987), in which, in time, social agents create, fix, dispute and negotiate meaning, forming contingent, useful consenses, engaging with a material world that offers resistance to the free flow of semiosis. The diachronic, experiential dimension of social being can not only be reinstated into, but foregrounded, in analysis.

Women will appear in my account, but as exceptions. They tended to win respect through the adoption of specifically masculine embodiments and habituses, by becoming what in other contexts would be known as tomboys. Even the most broadly respected female writer coded her own femininity into her graff practice, writing "Sugar" and "Spice". Women were often present, but silent, and my own access to the girlfriends of rappers and writers was carefully monitored, and frequently resisted by the women themselves. Methodologically, I decided that I didn't want to incite people into discourse, to press people for their accounts, preferring to observe, and to learn from those whose accounts were forthcoming.

And my analysis will move beyond the shared space of the public (the street, clubs, pubs, trains, shopping centres) into bedrooms and lounge rooms. Suburban bedrooms are where, Thornton points out, teenagers define their own space by filling it with music (1996: 19-20); bedrooms are in fact where Hip Hop music is made. And J.U. and Blaze's selection of a name for their shop—The Lounge Room—is revelatory both in the explicit nostalgia discernible in the geographical and generational displacement of a domestic-familial
heimat space into their own social world, and for the implicit desire to move their cultural project beyond the usual leisure-work distinction marking the limits of sub-cultural being into the realm of ‘living-eating-sleeping-breathing Hip Hop’.

Essentially, though, this is an ethnography of young men organising a real, a world in response to a mass of cultural influences, influences that I will map out through the thesis.

J.U. responded to the unintended exclusion of women from his vision of Hip Hop:

Oh oh . . .

Miguel offered him a way out:

That was just a faux pas wasn’t it?

Allowing J.U. to explain himself:

Well yeah, brothers, is like a unity thing. I wouldn’t be saying brothers in a racial term—it means my brother you know, my friend, you know, my, my homie. Mate, I’ve seen some I’ve seen girls who can wreck the mike but they know who they are out there as well . . .

And, with this final subsumption of race, colour, sex, gender, difference to the all-embracing discourse of Hip Hop, the interview ended.

The Metaphysics of Hip Hop

Donna Haraway quotes Karin Knorr-Cetina’s account of “the world” as “science” see it:

this ‘world’ is the outcome of a process of inquiry constructed generatively and ontologically, rather than descriptively and epistemologically (in Haraway 1989: 33)

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182, emphases mine)

J.U. and his friends, like the scientists described by Knorr-Cetina, apparently understand themselves as being engaged in a (cultural) process of representation, rather than creation. The same implicit metaphysic girds the Hip Hop understanding of the relationship of practice to cultural essence. Practice, for J.U. and his friends, represented a pre-existing, 'ideal(-ised)' cultural essence. Hip Hop is not created by individuals doing things, the total of which is Hip Hop; Hip Hop is always already there, waiting to be done.

The moment of representation is in fact a moment of production, of what the phenomenological philosopher Judith Butler calls ‘essence fabrication’ (1988); creating a ‘real’, a transcendental signified, perhaps, that can then stand as the ‘alibi’ to a logic of representation founded on the sharing of a belief of its real-ness. By placing ‘interpretation’ at the heart of this account, the aspirations, beliefs and accounts of the individual agents engaged in these process will be privileged. These agents operate co-creatively within a partially constraining field of determination, a field which to no small extent structures experience, but must ultimately be understood as itself consisting of ‘instituted’, and therefore re-interpretable, negotiable, contestable orthodoxies.

Making Culture

Here’s how I want to understand this battle. J.U. was making a real. He was making a move in a real-making game; he was engaged in a (micro-)political struggle. He was attempting to institutionalise his own interpretation (Weber 1987) of the real, hegemonising the field of interpretation of Hip Hop by excluding dissident readings or understandings of just how that field might be (Laclau and Mouffe: 1984). He was “articulating” to a genre of music (to be distributed from his ‘place’), particular values, meanings, interpretations (Middleton 1984). He was claiming that in that music could be found a truth; that of Hip Hop; a truth that
could be found in that music. He was seeking to enrol other agents to this (his) truth (Clegg 1989), by claiming authoritative knowledge of that truth, and of the means of accessing it. Claiming the right to speak for the community, as well as claiming an access to ‘the truth’ of that culture.

In this introductory section, just as I have avoided directly addressing the important questions of race and class, I have expressly avoided offering any ‘definition’ of Hip Hop, other than allowing J.U., Mick E and Miguel to speak themselves. In the thesis that follows, I will elaborate upon these ideas. Key ‘insider’ concepts that have already appeared will reappear, to be supplemented by other accounts from other social agents engaged (antagonistically or otherwise) in the same field of the social, to be examined more closely; other performances, embodiments, discourses, texts, images, sounds and narratives will be discussed, with a view to understanding the grounds upon which, and the means by which, this labour of cultural production, this making of ‘Hip Hop’ takes place.

Footnotes

1 I am particularly thinking of a revealing collection of Media, Culture and Society essays published in 1986, reviewing the trajectory of British cultural and media studies through successive waves of Althusserian and Lacanian theory in the early years of that decade; theory which, in its determination to preserve increasingly fragile marxian positions, could only account for lived experience in terms of discourses of false consciousness (see Collins et al 1986).

2 The Mothership Connection continued to go to air up to the time of writing. At the time, Miguel estimated his listenership (probably optimistically) as being in the vicinity of 10,000.

3 There is a certain lack of consistency in spelling within the Hip Hop Scene: a playful discretion is the norm, particularly if there is a possibility of punning on significant words. Thus, the Fonke Knowmaads are also The
Funky Nomads, and sometimes The Fönké Knomaads, or any combination thereof. The Knowmaads released an EP in 1993, “The Hills are Alive With the Sound of . . .”, reviewed in Zest (2, Spring 1993: 4-6), before disbanding when one of their rappers, Teop (‘Poet’ written backwards) became a born-again Christian.

4 Abrahams’ work on African-American orality (1970, 1976, and then 1992) has been developed perhaps most significantly into an ambitious Afro-American [sic] literary theory by Gates (1988), an account in which the oral cultures of the sub-Sahara survived the Middle Passage, to be inflected by, and to find strategic application in, the experience of slavery. With specific reference to rapping as it emerged in New York in the late 1970s, Toop (1991) offers a thorough analysis of the development of various African-American forms throughout the Twentieth Century in the context of post-slave urban populations in 1984 (an earlier edition of Toop (1991)). A subsequent wealth of literature has offered essentially the same narrative, variously inflected: the collection of essays collected and introduced by Spencer (1991) is particularly useful; Hager (1984) and Tate (1992) offered more accessible accounts; and a flurry of publications in 1994 ranged from Tricia Rose’s academic treatment, through Fernando’s generously readable offering to the rather poor popularisation by Jones. Hebdige (1987) offers a thorough and entertaining account of the development of Jamaican toasting and boasting, and the passage of these practices to New York in the early 1970s.

5 The italicised words are those used within the scene.

6 See below, pages 50ff and 221ff.

7 J.U. for ‘Junior’. J.U.’s ‘real’ name is Ed; he is also known as ‘Special Ed’.

8 Awkward grammar. Try “I’ve heard the term ‘elitist’ has been flipped on me”.

9 Harris, in his spirited critique of what he calls ‘the gramscians’ of Birmingham sub-cultural theory, has a field day with what he understands as the tendential romanticism of the entire project (1992: 3; 7-29 passim).

10 A writer wrote their name: a writer would ask a new acquaintance “what do you write?”, to which the second writer would respond with their tag: “I write Puma”, for example. Ideally, this would be met with a recognition of that tag’s ubiquity, and a discussion would ensue about getting up.
“Anything for Hip Hop”

I had arranged to meet with Shane Duggan, aka DJ Vame of Def Wish Cast. We sat down early one afternoon in an inner city bar in the heart of Sydney’s nightclub precinct. Over gin and orange juices, Vame and his friend Bomba, a writer visiting Sydney after a stint behind bars (for graffiti-related vandalism offences) in his home city, Adelaide, brought me up to date with Vame’s new project. In mid 1994 Vame was in the throes of leaving the crew to pursue his own project, Dope Runner Productions. He planned to record, produce and distribute Hip Hop from the west of Sydney, offering young rappers studio experience and protecting them from the predatory dangers of mainstream recording companies.¹

Vame had insisted that we meet “in the city”, rather than somewhere closer to his own home in the far western suburbs. He and Bomba, he said, would enjoy a day out, visiting record shops (and, I guessed, getting up) and hanging out. Besides, there really wasn’t anywhere to meet “out west”, other than at home . . .

We talked for a few hours about Hip Hop, the technicalities of sampling and DJing, writing, about what I was doing. The time came to head off to our respective afternoons, and I thanked Vame for his trouble in travelling two hours into town to talk with me. “That’s cool, man . . .” I was reassured,

“. . . anything for Hip Hop”.

37
Theoretical Frameworks

The knowledge whereby one lives is not necessarily identical with the knowledge whereby one explains life.

Michael Jackson “Introduction” to Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology (1996): 2

Here are the two overarching theoretical frames for this thesis.

Phenomenology. Michael Jackson, drawing upon Ricoeur’s definition—“an investigation into the structures of experience which precede connected expression in language”—understands phenomenology as “the scientific study of experience . . . an attempt to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy” (Jackson ibid, including the Ricoeur quote). This is my guiding concern: to understand the world of experience of the persons I encountered in what I will call the Sydney Hip Hop Scene.

But as I have already suggested, I am also interested in the “connected expression in language” with which these persons ‘explain’ their lives. The dimensions of ‘experience’ and ‘explanation’, insofar as they are separable, must be understood in being in a complex, forever unfolding dialectical relationship with each other, co-creating the social and the individual (insofar as they, too, are separable).

Which leads to the second overarching theoretical frame: that of the ‘social imaginary’.

In his careful consideration of the production and maintenance of nationalisms, Homi Bhabha traces the efforts of post-colonialist and feminist theorists to “redefine the symbolic processes through which the social imaginary—nation, culture or community—

Writing of the social imaginary called ‘nationalism’, Bhabha argues that “terms of cultural engagement . . . are produced performatively” (1994a: 2). Cultural agents are subjects engaged in a “process of signification”. At the same time, however, in what Bhabha calls the ‘double-time’ of the narrative of nationalism, cultural agents are the objects of a nationalist pedagogy:

In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative (1994b: 145).

The pedagogic must constantly be articulated to unfolding (and I would add, ‘embodied, affectively experienced’) performance: the ‘split’ must be papered over, the performative lined up with and integrated with, the pedagogy. The “living people”, Bhabha argues, “represent the cutting edge between the totalising powers of the ‘social’ as homogeneous, consensual community, and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious unequal interests” (146).

Recasting Bhabha’s argument in phenomenological terms, the process of the narration of nation involves a moment in which the phenomenological subject of the living, embodied human life identifies itself as the object of a nationalist pedagogy. Practice, or ‘performance,’ is not simply generated by ‘tradition’ (pedagogy), but, in all its difference, in all its potential inequality and specificity, is articulated to a body of discourse. ‘Tradition’ becomes an explanation for practice: what one does in synchronic time is accounted for in terms of the body of discourse that precedes, diachronically, that embodied performance.

Once again, none of this is to deny the dialectical, co-creative interplay between the pedagogic and the performative. Performance does not take place in a vacuum; one does not create one’s self ex nihilio. This line of thinking, recapitulating, perhaps,
Raymond Williams' understanding of 'culture' as the "felt sense of the quality of life", or the "structures of feeling" at "any particular place and time" (1961: 61), prioritises the affective dimensions of being, and enables me to offer an account of Hip Hop in Sydney which, frankly, at the outset of my project, I could not have anticipated.

In what follows, I want to lead the reader through my exploration of Vame's pledge of himself to this thing called 'Hip Hop', looking at the ways in which embodied practice is given meaning through being located within a tradition. Starting with narratives of origin (Part 1), I will move through a detailed examination of the multidimensional field within which this cultural work takes place (Part 2), arriving at a tentative crystallisation of the 'ideology of Hip Hop' which I will use as a point of departure for a discussion of the Hip Hop Social Imaginary (Part 3). In the final section (Part 4), I want to consider the phenomenological, affective grounds without which the claims made for the Hip Hop social imaginary could not be sustained.

Fieldwork

I want to be clear about one thing before going any further: I am not a fan of rap music; my background and early professional training was in theatre, my second undergraduate degree in Performance Studies. My interest in what I came to know as 'hip hop' (or, subsequently, the capitalised 'Hip Hop') was stirred in mid 1992, when Public Enemy were touring Australia. Engaged by their political discourse (I had once painted a house with Fear of a Black Planet on high rotation), I attended a concert at Sydney's Hordern Pavilion. P.E. were supported by Ice T and a local Hip Hop/dance act, Sound Unlimited. I have elsewhere expanded on the events of that night (Maxwell and Bambrick 1994), and my subsequent engagement with rap, Hip Hop, and
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

attendant phenomena. I need not linger upon those circumstances here, other than to establish the scope of this present work.

My research into the Sydney Hip Hop scene extended from August 1992 to October 1994, a time delimited by the institutional constraints of completing a postgraduate degree. My initial intention was to research the impact (if any) of the discourses of authenticity, race and sexuality produced on stage by Public Enemy and Ice T upon the predominantly male, teenage audience that I found myself among on that night. I envisaged the work as locating itself within that sub-genre of performance studies known as 'reception studies' (see Martin and Sauter 1995 for an overview of this research), along the way addressing the vexed, recurrent issue of the putative 'Americanisation' of (a supposedly originary/authentic?) 'Australian Youth Culture', of which the local press seem so enamoured. As I sought out people interested in what I then thought of as 'rap', however, I stumbled headlong into that sub-genre, or perhaps that ur-genre, of Cultural Studies, Subculture Studies. I literally came across what appeared to be a local Hip Hop sub-culture: a collection of mostly male 'hip-hoppers', of diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, claiming to span the length and breadth of Sydney (and, I was to discover, Australia), producing their own raps, graffiti, and engaged in their own project of producing what they variously described as a Hip Hop Community, Nation, or Culture. It is my own engagement with a brief moment of that ongoing project that forms the basis of this thesis, and it is to that labour of communitarian and cultural production that I want to address my own efforts.

I make this point because my primary concern is not rap music per se. If, at any point, my writing veers towards a tendentious celebration of rap, of a putative 'Hip Hop Culture' (a term to be read as sous erâture), it is due more to my own attempt to maintain my enthusiasm for my own project, or to my often pleased surprise at the vivacity of the various individuals and groups that I encountered along the way, than to any wish to
somehow mark 'Hip Hop' as a privileged site of cultural production, or as a particularly important or even decisive moment within a narrative of global, or Australian, cultural development. Hip Hop, despite the radical assertions of participants and some writers alike, is not the future, at least not in Sydney, Australia.

I am concerned with what the efforts of the various agents and groups whom I encountered over a period of two years and a bit might have to teach us about the formation of 'cultures', of the negotiation and determination of 'tradition', of the construction of habituses: genres for the living of lives. That is what is at stake here: people, mostly young, (but getting older, and herein lies one of the most interesting features of the cultural production itself: what happens when the 'youths' of a 'youth culture' grow up?), mostly male, living in Sydney, Australia, in the mid 1990s, negotiating their own being, 'decoding', negotiating, reconstructing, the myriad of resources within which they find themselves (into which they are, in the Heideggerian sense, thrown), which in part determine the possibilities of their being, delimiting options, discursively positioning them, inciting them towards particular ontological assumptions, but, which, perhaps more excitingly, also 'empower' them, so that it is possible to understand the efforts of these individuals, after Peirce, as a 'community of investigators' attempting to make sense of the world that partly constructs them, but with which they are productively, dialogically engaged.

Terminology

In an often (in popular music studies circles, at least) celebrated paper, Will Straw has highlighted "the long-standing preoccupation of popular—music scholars with the concept of community", associating it with a growing engagement with concepts of space and nation in cultural theory (1991: 368). I will return, below, to an extended consideration of the various Hip Hop imaginaries; it will be useful, however, at this point, to offer a brief account of
Straw's analysis of 'music communities', in the first instance to stress that my use of the words 'Hip Hop Community' is derived from that term's ubiquity within the field that I researched, and to, in effect, establish that my use of the term is to be read 'under erasure', as it were. I will not take claims to 'community' at face value, arguing later that this putative 'community' might better be understood to be an effect of the various discourses referring to it, rather than being an empirical quantity itself.

Straw cautions against "notions of cultural totality or claims asserting the expressive unity of musical practices", suggesting that notwithstanding "the articulatory force of specific musical practices has often displaced [in analysis] the cultural communities as the guarantee of music's meaningfulness," there remains a tendency to privilege the geographically local (369). Straw's endeavour is to critique attempts to array valorising discourses of 'authenticity' "rooted in geographical, historical and culturalunities" (369) against an "increasingly universal system of articulation" (Said quoted by Straw 369) which itself is seen as a totalising effect of political economy. Citing Paul Gilroy (1987, and, I would add, 1993), Straw advocates an attention to the processes of diaspora and the global circulation of cultural forms" which create "lines of influence and solidarity different to, but no less meaningful than those observable within geographically circumscribed communities."

Straw advocates replacing the use of the word 'community' with 'scene'. The former, he suggests

presumes a population group whose composition is relatively stable—according to a wide range of sociological variables—and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage (373).

Straw uses 'scene' to mark a "cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation" (373). A scene is a
terrain of negotiation and of genre-policing, productive of powerful affective links between a contemporary musical practice and heritage “seen to render this contemporary activity appropriate to a given context” (373). The point of Straw’s analysis is to understand the unity of purpose constituting a musical ‘community’ as an “ideological effect” not in order to “expose the relative status” of such communities, but in order to account for the production of communities which share such unities without being “organically grounded in local circumstances”, resourcing themselves through “an attentiveness to change occurring elsewhere” (374).

The appropriateness of such thinking to Hip Hop in Sydney should be apparent. It is not my intention to ‘expose’ the inauthenticity of this scene, notwithstanding the ironic ascription within Hip Hop of authenticity to practices which are quite literally ‘inauthentic’: sampling as both a compositional device, and as a trope for the adoption of practices from ‘elsewhere’ (graffiti, break-dancing, clothing, language and so on). However, in no way might these processes be seen as being (merely) culturally promiscuous, as celebrating a post-modern valorisation of the pastiche, a privileging of the playfully eclectic for its own sake. On the contrary, the use of the term ‘community’ precisely bespeaks a concern with ‘the authentic’, with tradition and the fixing of values.

Straw’s analysis of the terrain of ‘alternative rock’ starts to part company with my own needs here. His concerns “as someone who studies musical institutions” is less with the “substance of [the] values” which allow the coalescing of discrete populations into (musical) communities than with the “[institutional] alliances produced by their circulation” (385). My project, on the other hand, is concerned precisely with the values that constitute the feelingful possibility of a Sydney Hip Hop Community; that constitute, for the people involved, the possibility of thinking about such a culture.
In addition to using the Bourdieuan term ‘field’ (that “set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power” [Wacquant in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16]), I have adopted Straw’s use of the term ‘scene’ to refer to the context within which the attempts to establish a ‘Hip Hop Community’ are enacted, or ‘performed’. This has the advantage of maintaining a critical attitude towards the word ‘community’, rather than endowing it with a strict positivity. The ‘scene’ is that heterogenous space within which the various practices constituting, within the discourse of ‘Hip Hop’, ‘Hip Hop’ itself, are enacted. By ‘heterogenous’, I only mean that this is a space within which agents might graffiti, listen to rap music, even rap themselves, wear Hip Hop-styled clothing and so on, without thinking themselves to be participants in a ‘community’ of Hip Hop. The process of articulating these practices to the discourse of Hip Hop, in order to constitute a ‘Hip Hop Community’ is a kind of disciplining, or closure of the field of articulation which operates to enrol the actors involved in such activities to that discourse. And of course, the ‘discourse of Hip Hop Community’ itself is one of the disciplining, or ‘suturing’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) delimitations of the potential meanings of those activities, constructing its own ‘positivity’ in the process of its own reproduction.

This is also an appropriate moment to consider just how to refer to these ‘individuals’, ‘cultural’ or ‘social agents’. They are not all ‘rappers’, ‘rhymers’, ‘writers’, ‘bombers’, ‘DJs’, ‘selectors’, ‘breakers’, or ‘b-boys’, and I rarely heard the term ‘Hip Hoppers’3. Unlike ‘punks’, ‘goths’, ‘ravers’, ‘hippies’, ‘bikers’ . . . the whole pantheon of sub-cultural identities . . . (see Polhemus 1994) the people (almost exclusively male) whose practices, beliefs, discourses and knowledges I came to know were not so explicitly, self-consciously concerned with constructing their own identity as with the alignment of their (already existing) selves with ‘Hip Hop’. Thus, I would hear “I’m into Hip Hop”, or “ninety per cent of my life is Hip Hop; the other 10% I’m asleep”, or, better still, “I eat, breathe and sleep Hip Hop”.

45
I will, then, throughout my account, fudge on this question a bit, preferring the clumsiness of Bourdieuan formulations such as ‘social (or cultural) agents’, or even ‘individuals’ (although not wanting to predicate, through such a usage, an unreconstructed self-present subject) to a more global term such as ‘Hip Hopper’, a term which would not quite ring true ethnographically. Where possible I will follow the insider practice of referring to these various agents in terms of their particular ‘Hip Hop practice’: ‘writer’, ‘rhymer’, ‘DJ’ and so on, reflecting the notion, circulating within the scene, that Hip Hop offered a vocational variety catering to all sensibilities and physiognomies. As one rhymer describes his introduction to rapping:

I was about seven years old eight years old my cousin sort of introduced me to it you know like full break dancing and stuff like that I was a pretty chubby kid so I couldn’t do it good you know. And graffiti . . . all my friends were into it and I wasn’t very good at that either so I just strayed into the rhymes you know.

I want to note, too, that this characteristically ethnographic mode of engagement with the object of my research is intended to stand as a corrective to what I consider to be the disturbing cultural studies approaches in which ‘the media’ (which itself will form a large part of my own text) is reified and theorised without regard to cultural agents (other than the cultural theorist doing the writing). I take, as exemplary of this kind of work, McKenzie Wark’s recent Virtual Geography (1995), in which a discourse of ‘weird events’ and ‘media vectors’ displaces any possibility of engaging with any cultural agents other than the writer himself. Notwithstanding his claim to “not want to abstract weird global events too far out of time of lived experience in everyday life in which we find them” (x), the ‘everyday experience’ to which Wark refers throughout his text is inevitably, his own. This is not necessarily a problem, except insofar as the personal account (“I’m lying in bed with my lover and the cat . . .” [6]) is, throughout this text, generalised into the totalised ‘we’ of the foregoing sentence, a ‘we’ that can only really make sense when it is understood as a
community of investigators, the dimensions of which extend roughly around that group which Wark, himself attempting to locate himself at the epicentre of a community, collects under the label “Sydney poststructuralism” (xii).

Wark writes that “[i]ncreasingly, culture . . . abstracts itself from all particularity” (xiii). Although this does not seem to trouble Wark’s own attempt to construct an oxymoronically totalising post-structuralist subject, I do not necessarily want to mount an ad hominem argument⁴. Rather, I want to set against this straw man of post-structuralist cultural studies orthodoxy an ethnographic account of the efforts of a group of social agents attempting to increasingly engage itself with, rather than to abstract itself from, ‘particularity’. This present work is all about the attempts of a group of cultural agents to actively resist any such process of abstraction, by, perhaps, particularising a mediated, globalised cultural formation (Hip Hop), and ‘claiming’ it, as it were, for their own particular circumstances. Indeed, I would argue that, in the course of this research, I am presenting an example of an attempt on the part of particular social agents, in response to an increasingly decentred, mediated, ‘post-modern’ cultural context, to (literally, in a geographical sense, as I shall show) ground, to centre and to fix the bases of their experience.⁵

Throughout my fieldwork, I presented myself as a researcher, as someone writing about Hip Hop in Sydney. I did not consider myself to be a ‘participant observer’, although I did (of course) came to enjoy the performances, the graffiti, the break-dancing, the freestyling, the recordings, and the company of those with whom I spent time. I accumulated (sub-)cultural capital (Thornton 1996), the ability to pass informed aesthetic judgements about various (sub-)cultural artefacts, whether they be recording or pieces, and was recognised as someone who ‘respected’ the ‘culture’ I was observing.

I want to clarify my relationship with the Hip Hop scene out of a regard for a Bourdieuan concern with ‘reflexive sociology’, with understanding myself as being located within the same field as the
'objects' of my research. As a corollary, of course, my presence as a researcher became significant within the generative economy of meaning-making which I was investigating. That I was researching what 'they' were doing operated as a confirmation of the significance, the very reality of 'their' cultural labours. I will return to this later.

The fieldwork upon which this work is based developed from my initial approaches, subsequent to the Public Enemy concert, to anybody I came across wearing a Public Enemy t-shirt or baseball cap. Within a couple of weeks, I had met Blaze; over a longer period I met other characters in the scene. I read local magazines, listened to recordings, to specialist radio programmes, attended performances, hung out with writers, and allowed myself to be talked to and educated. I do not claim that I saw all of the scene, or that I followed every lead. It is not my intention to offer either a complete history of the local scene, nor an exhaustive, inclusive sociology. Nor do I claim to be 'up to date' with the scene: my research concludes arbitrarily, abruptly, in October 1994. I interviewed individuals formally and informally, video-recorded some performances, recorded some others. What became apparent over this period, and what now constitutes this writing, was an intense desire on the part of a number of geographically dispersed (Sydney is a very broad city) young people, once again, mostly male, from mixed ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, to constitute themselves as a community, to claim for that community the status of a culture, a claim accompanied and supported by claims to specific knowledges, traditions and practices, and to locate that culture as part of a trans-national movement, the Hip Hop Nation.
Footnotes

1 046's debt CD *L.I.F.E.* was the first major Dope Runner release, in 1995, although it was preceded by a number of cassette releases.

2 I do recall, however, dancing at a Sydney inner city nitespot, adumbratively named The Hip Hop Club, to Grandmaster Flash’s “White Lines” in 1984, and memorising the words to their earlier hit “The Message” and performing it at an undergraduate cabaret the year after.

3 Although as I type a rhyme by The Chief from a crew called The Ruffnecks swims around my head:

Ripping up the microphone is not a crime  
Here comes the rhyme, dripping with slime  
What's the time? I think it's time to get ill  
Listen to the wicked words from my grill  
...  
Hold on now it's time to get it on  
Fuck the love songs we're coming on strong  
Doing no wrong we're just two hip hoppers  
Listen to the twisted words from my *voca loca*

4 See Curthoys and Docker (1996) for an argument addressed to what those writers understand as a similarly totalising tendency in Foucault’s foundational post-structuralist *oeuvre*.

5 As I write, I notice Wark quoted in a feature article about post-grunge youth culture in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (“Make Mine a Martini” by Alex Burke, Saturday February 3, 1996; 7S). Wark offers a media-friendly sound-bite generalisation: “there is no memory in popular culture”. By contrast, I want to suggest that the self-genealogising, and thereby, self-generating, project of the Sydney Hip Hop Community, is precisely illustrative of at the very least, a desire for (collective) popular cultural memory. Although, of course, perhaps Wark is right in the general case, and my example offers only the curiosity of a quirky aberration (a throwback?) amidst the schizophrenic (Jameson 1991) eternal present of the post-modern condition.

6 Blaze took his tag from a news story: “Big Blaze Destroys Building”: “this thing wasted a building,” he told a journalist: “I liked it” (Thwaite 1989: 72). To *destroy* or to *waste* a building or a train or a wall is to completely cover it with graffiti. And Blaze was one of the best graffitists ever to wield a spraycan in Sydney.
Part 1: Origins

The search for origins is typically a subversive activity. Its usual purpose is to discover precedents that justify claims of one sort or another, inevitably at someone's expense. One has the suspicion that if such justifications were not needed, the search for precedents in the form of pedigrees, genealogies, myths of origin, and the like would be of no great interest . . . Not only do people use genealogies to validate existing social relationships, they use these relationships to prove the genealogies, modelling the form of the latter on the former. This genealogical argument is a kind of petitio principii, an illicit use of causality, mechanism of managing and often reordering history to find support for present purposes. In whatever form, the search for origins is usually an illicit mode of justification because it always sends us back to itself as its own first principle.


“Fads don’t last ten years!”

. . . announces Ser Reck of Def Wish Cast, as DJ Vame warms up the turntables (the ones and twos). I am at Site nightclub in inner-city Kings Cross. The event is the launch of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (A.B.C.)'s Open Learning Cultural Studies and Popular Music course, to which I have contributed a piece on Sydney Hip Hop, and Def Wish Cast have been invited to perform for the assembled academics and ABC suits. They and their friends are uncomfortable as they wait for their set: a clutch of boys and girls in baggy jeans and sweat shirts having to explain who they are every time they ask for a (complimentary) drink. They decide that this is the perfect opportunity to 'represent': to state who they are, and to promote not merely their project as a group of
performers, but their cultural project, Hip Hop. Hence Ser Reck's précis of his commitment: "Fads don't last . . ."

Ser Reck's graffiti name is Unique. He has been writing (graffiti) for . . . well, ten years. He gets paid to do it these days. He is 24 years old.

In performance, Def Wish Cast simply kick. On this particular night, they pull out all stops, wrecking the mics with the anthemic "A.U.S.T. Down Under Comin' Up"; launching into the chorus of "Running Amok":

Is that your head or did your neck throw up?

Three or four of their friends bounce up and down on the dance floor chanting "West Side, West Side . . ." The ABC suits take steps backwards, pressing the smalls of their backs to the bar. Def Wish Cast continue to rip shit up as they produce an a capella beat box rap; and then the show stopper: Def Wish's syllable ballistics, a sixty second burst of raga-rap, an unbroken stream of raucous, burbling rhymes delivered at the speed of sound. Finally, each of the three rappers takes to the floor to break as DJ Vame scratches and cuts the vinyl on the ones and twos. A few circling steps, a lunging move onto the floor, and the break dance moves appear: flurries of arms and legs, spinning torsos, before finally returning to the microphones to once again proclaim the realness, and, what I always find fascinating, the fundamental benevolence of the Hip Hop culture of (western) Sydney.

The 'Standard Narrative'

The 'standard narrative' of the origins of Hip Hop (The Bronx, Afrika Bambaata, Cool Herc and so on) can be found most authoritatively in Toop (1991, an update of 1984), Hager (1984) and Rose (1994); Fernando (1994), and less satisfactorily, Jones (1994), offer more accessible, but somewhat celebratory accounts
of the same story. Spencer (1991) includes Stephen’s historical overview of “the three waves of rap music” amongst a patchy collection of essays, among the best of which is Peterson-Lewis’s fine response to Gates (inter alia)’s defence of obscene rap lyrics (1990).¹

Beyond this history of Hip Hop from the mid-1970s to the present, Gates (1988) argues for a cultural continuity: an African-American oral tradition, traceable through the Middle Passage back to the sub-Saharan griot, elaborated by the experience of slavery. Gilroy’s remarkable analysis of the African-American ‘experience’ as a counter-culture of modernity (1993) is an important corrective to the essentialising (but strategically significant, perhaps) pan-Africanism of Gates’s work; Brian Cross’s archaeology of the Los Angelino Hip Hop scene (1993) usefully augments (and compounds) questions of ‘origin’, as does Flores’ important contributions (1987; 1994), stressing the Latino influence, particularly in regard to break-dancing and graffiti.

So here is the standard narrative: rapping, the historical precedents of which can be found in the singer-historian/faith-healer of sub-Saharan Africa, inflected through the forced orality of slavery and the more benign evangelism of Southern Baptism, (re?-)united with the rhythms of Africa via the Caribbean, collided, in the late 1970s, in New York, with the Latino-American tradition of quasi-combative dance and (also Latino) urban idio-graphics, morphing into what Brewer calls “Hip Hop Graffiti” (1992). The standard account of Hip Hop traces its ‘origin’ to this moment in time and space, cf. The Bronx, in the late 1970s, when these three key practices coincided, at which point apparently, a ‘culture’ was, if not born, then at least became discernible.

Subsequently, rap as a musical form went through a number of what Stephens (1991) calls ‘waves’, starting with the ‘Boogie-Woogie’ and ‘message rap’ of period up to around 1982: the Sugarhill Gang, Kurtis Blow, Grandmaster Flash and Africa Bambaata. Influenced by new synthesiser technology and the electronic music of European artists such as Kraftwork, this ‘Old
School’ Hip Hop is most readily associated with break-dancing. The second wave, extending through to the middle of the 1980s, Stephens suggests, was the increasingly commercialised ‘Rock’n’Roll’ Hip Hop of L.L. Cool J., Run DMC, Big Daddy Kane, Eric B and Rakim and the 2 Live Crew. Sexuality was foregrounded, with boasting and battling emerging as driving forces in composition. By the mid 1980s, what Stephens calls ‘hard-core hip-hop’ emerged, with crews such as Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions moving towards an expressly didactic politicisation of their audience. Cross’s account of the Los Angelino scene sketches out the parallel evolution of West Coast rap, with its origins deep in the Watts Poets tradition of ghetto-realism; Ro (1996) subsequently maps out what he reads as the distortion of this movement into the ‘gangsta’ rap of the early 1990s.

‘Authenticity’ emerges as the key theme around which the practice of Hip Hop (and much of the academic work on Hip Hop) has been organised. The ‘commercialisation’ of Hip Hop, for example, is a notion that is predicated upon a narrative of cultural forms as pure expression of a substratal structure (see Watson 1983), distorted by capital or otherwise constituted hegemonic interests (Light 1991, Blair 1993). Arguments about rap and Hip Hop constellated around questions of authenticity need to offer an account of the moment of co-incidence of breaking, rapping and graffiti in New York in the late 1970s, leading to the extended archaeological projects of African-American theorists such as Gates, in which ‘the African-American experience’ coheres these practices into a ‘cultural’ whole. These archaeologies then feed back into the field of cultural production: witness the pan-African rap of, for example The Native Tribes Posse, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah et al (Gilroy 1993: 85), or the more militant Islamo-national rap of which Public Enemy is perhaps the most accessible example (Gilroy 84; Perkins 1991). As well as being a key analytic at work within the discursive world of Hip Hop, ‘authenticity’ is an axis around which an industry of academic popular musicology has organised itself (see, for example Goodwin 1990), particularly as popular music studies and ethnomusicology...
encounter each other over 'world music' (Feld 1994a; Erlman 1996; Neuenfeldt 1994, Mitchell 1992). In regards to Hip Hop, essentialising accounts of origin invest massive cultural capital in ideas about 'authenticity', reflected both in the ethnographic Hip Hop scenes (in their various diasporic forms), wherein 'authenticity' constitutes a core feature of the Hip Hop 'ideoscape', and in academic writing on Hip Hop and rap (cf. the usual 'insider'—i.e. African-American and related Studies suspects: Rose, Gates, Jones, Fernando, Decker, Spencer et al, as well as some interesting takes from outside [European] perspectives: Fornäs 1994 and Cloonan 1995 in particular are able, because of their geographical and cultural distance, to offer perhaps more critical reflections on these questions).

The Polychrome Pacific

Paul Gilroy has figured the "rhizomatic, fractal structure of the transcultural and international formation" of the African-American experience through the spatio-temporal trope of the 'black Atlantic', that transitional zone across and through which the dialectic of modernity's encounter with its (black) counterculture was enacted (1993: 4). For Gilroy the enduring continuity of "black Atlantic political culture" can be accounted for in terms of the "ways in which closeness to the ineffable terrors was kept alive—carefully cultivated—in ritualised, social forms" (73). I am concerned, similarly, with the keeping alive and the cultivation of social forms. In the Australian case, however, the continuity of the experience of slavery, or the geographic continuity of the (black) Atlantic, is not available as a ground upon which the social forms are 'kept', or cultivated: there is, instead, a radical discontinuity of experience (and, of course, geography, a discontinuity which also manifests as a temporal disjunction) here, productive of the specificity of the 'Australian Hip Hop experience'. Hemispherically displacing (and thereby disrupting the geographical contiguity of) Gilroy's metaphor, we may discern a polychrome Pacific, through and across which the discontinuity of
the encounter of (the standard narrative of) African-American Hip Hop with the experience of young people in Australia, in the early 1980s, might be considered\textsuperscript{2}. 'Authenticity' for the geographically discontiguous, isolated and multicultural social agents engaged in Australian Hip Hop, could not subsist in a discourse of historical continuity, or even in a shared diasporic experience, grounded either in a remote historical myth of lost identity or in an identity of suffering or oppression. Instead, the story of Hip Hop in Australia largely turns upon the possibility of ascribing to local performance an authenticity that had to be articulated to a discontinuous, geographically remote narrative of origin. It is to the efforts to effect this articulation, of, in Bhabha's terms, pedagogy to practice, that I now turn.

Here is how Mick E and E.S.P. explained the authenticity of their Hip Hop practice. I had asked them about a 'drive-by' shooting in Far Western Sydney, about which they have recorded a rap:

E.S.P.: Friends of ours were performing there [Villawood] and we went to see them and after the show, after everything was finished late at night ... inside there was a fight, between the Lebs and the Blacks, and the Lebs got kicked out, and they came back and did a drive by.

Mick E: I mean that's American ... That's very stupid ... the drive-by, but then it happened in Australia, therefore I wrote a rap about it as an Australian issue.

E.S.P.: 'Cos to start with, things do happen in Australia that do happen in America, like the drive-by and all that, like people say, mate, I dunno they say like, they'd call Australian rappers fake, but ...

Mick E: Nah, we're not, because we're talking about things that happen in Australia, even though they may be American things happening, but they're happening ...
I'll flesh out this evocation of a suburban landscape of "blacks" and "Lebs" below. What I want to note here is the assertion of a claim to Hip Hop authenticity through complementary ontological and epistemological moves: the simultaneous predication of a (the) 'real'—the (mean) streets where 'things happen'—and the positioning of the rapper as the figure able to see, understand and to report upon this reality. For Mick E, this principle could be extended into an aesthetic of Hip Hop music: 'hard core' (a term expressing an unreserved aesthetic approval) raps simply involved telling things as they are. The Mick E and E.S.P. double act explained that Mick (the rap-writing half of the equation) writes

E.S.P.: things that I saw that happened in the city . . .
Mick: Realistic things . . . straight to the point . . . not hiding things, straight out, straight to the point . . .
E.S.P.: Especially if you go out one night and something happens, and you spin out 'wow' . . .
Mick: Like the drive-by, I wrote about it the day after . . .
E.S.P.: That's Hip Hop . . .
Mick: Yeah, Hip Hop is . . .
E.S.P.: Self experience, self expression . . .
Mick: . . . telling your story.

There are echoes here of Public Enemy's Chuck D's styling of himself as 'Black America's C.N.N.', and the arguments of Gates (1990), Jefferson (1992) and Stanley (1992) defending 'obscene' rap lyrics: 'telling it like it is'3. These are well-rehearsed models for the understanding of what it is to be a rapper: to play out this role, to adopt these attitudes, then, is one way to assert Hip Hop authenticity.

There are many ways in which an Australian Hip Hopper might assert the authenticity of their project. Some argue that the experience of being a member of an ethnic minority in Sydney is sufficiently comparable to that of the oppressed African-American
to allow an inter-subjective identification. The number of Anglo-Saxon youths I met professing allegiance to Hip Hop, however, would appear to mitigate against this being the dominant mode of what I will provisionally call 'identification', begging, perhaps a more generalised notion of 'otherness' or marginalisation around which a desire to 'be' Hip Hop might constellate; racial or ethnic otherness might then be considered to be a special case of a more general sense of otherness, the specificity of which might take any number of form: recall the appeal of rapping to the "pretty chubby kid" who was "no good at sport" (above, p46). Blaze claimed to be an outsider because he 'didn’t like guitars'—the synthetic, sampled sounds of Old School rap offered a more satisfying alternative. On this kind of account, Hip Hop stands as a kind of reservoir catching the misfits of (schoolyard) society—this, indeed, was a theory put to me by a number of insiders, sometimes bluntly (I was taken aside one night and had it explained to me that Hip Hop tended to appeal to those who were "not too bright"); more often it was couched in terms of a 'they' or a 'mainstream' which was unable to understand the 'reality' to which the 'outsider' figure had immediate, unmediated access.

Political solidarity is often cited: to believe in the emancipatory values espoused by key African-American Hip Hop figures; peace, brotherhood [sic], anti-racism, and so forth (in other words, the standard occidental litany of self-evident liberties), constituted sufficient grounds for claiming a Hip Hop authenticity. The discourse of the right to self-expression is closely related to both these lines: rap (and graffiti) is held to constitute a means by which otherwise silent (silenced) voices can be heard. A discourse of youthful rebelliousness often accompanied this: it is not an ethnic or politically marginalised group that seeks emancipation from 'the (corrupt) system': it is youth. Still others argue that simply participating in the same activities as putatively original or authentic 'Hip Hoppers' sufficiently qualifies one as similarly authentic.
I will return to these discourses later. My argument is, in part, that the massive labour of effacing the irreducible discontinuity of experience between (a perceived) African-American Hip Hop and the local experience relies upon the fabrication of an idea of an abstractable essence of Hip Hop, an essence evidenced, and thereby given credence (the term used within the scene is 'represented') by the public, visible, sustained practice of rapping, writing and breaking. I want to foreground the labour involved in sustaining the contiguity between the idea and the practice, the labour of producing a *habitus*, and, more importantly, ensuring that meanings are maintained over time. This involves less the rigorous maintenance of a system than the capacity to reconcile practice to discourse, to produce, over time, a fit between what is done, or is being done, and the narrative of 'culture' within the context of which the actors understand their practices.

**A Story of Hip Hop in Sydney: Sound Unlimited's narrative of “the Origins of Sydney Hip Hop”**

... hip hop autobiographies are accepted at face value, simply because they perpetuate a collusive myth that feeds artists, fans, scholars, newshounds and self-appointed moral guardians alike.

Hip Hop historian David Toop writing on the death of Los Angelino gangsta-rap figure, Eazy-E in *The Face*, May 1995

In a comic-book style booklet circulated in clubs, pubs, venues, and cafes, the Sydney rap outfit Sound Unlimited, or rather, their publicists, in 1993 produced a narrative in which an early 1980s Sydney “scene”, in “dire need of an energy boost” is saved from a “dismal future” by the arrival (“enter the future”, the caption reads) of “three graffitti writting break dancers and a singing school girl captivated by the funk”. The ‘funk’ was hip-hop [sic]. In the Sound Unlimited narrative, “gangs would congregate west of
the city, engaging in break-dance battles”. In this environment, Kode Blue and Rosano were introduced to each other by “Penguin, a mutual friend from back in the dayz”. Together, they formed the United Break Team, dancing in clubs, touring with the Rock Steady Crew (“one of the highpoints of this period”). “Phase Two” of the story concerns the dispersal by the police of outdoor break-dancing parties, and the “outlawing” of “hip hop culture” and the subsequent channelling of “b-boy energy into the ever-expanding graf-scene”. Rosano meets Vlad (later the Sound Unlimited DJ) and forms the Future Art Beat (FAB) Four bomb squad.

As the “graf scene exploded”, DJs were honing their skills in their bedrooms “out west”. Unable to get club gigs, these turntable instrumentalists threw small parties outdoors, using petrol generated sound systems, drawing larger and larger crowds. “It was these jams that gave birth to Australian rap”; the “def jams held by the West Side Posse”: “the emergence of this street culture forced clubs to re-evaluate the situation and open their doors to that fat sound of hip-hop” (see Maxwell and Bambrick 1994 for an extended reading of this booklet).

This comic-book version of the story of Sydney Hip Hop circulated throughout the scene, arousing a degree of antipathy. Some felt that it was somewhat self-serving, self-important and failed to sufficiently respect the contribution of others. Others (older, wiser heads, perhaps) recognised the hand of the marketing executive, and were able to assimilate the document to the narrative of commodification (and even selling-out) that was more and more frequently applied to Sound Unlimited (and against which Sound Unlimited were determined to defend themselves; see Maxwell and Bambrick 1994 and Blair 1993). The point is not, however, for me to legislate on such matters; indeed, allowing for poetic embellishments, and the tendency of the account to anachronise various ideas (the Hip Hop personae spring into the story fully formed, already, within the narrative, referring to an anterior golden age, “back in the dayz”, constituting within the logic of the story just the kind of petitio principii Holston identifies at
the heart of any genealogical project; Maxwell and Bambrick1994), Sound Unlimited’s story is, in fact, fairly accurate. However, its appearance in the form that it took was seen as an attempt to bestow upon it a logocentric authority, an authority which, to others in the scene, both failed to represent the contribution of other important figures, and was inappropriate, given Sound Unlimited’s straying from ‘true’ Hip Hop into the realms of commercial and aesthetic compromise: Sound Unlimited were, in a very real sense, perceived as having made an inappropriate grab for what Sarah Thornton has called ‘sub-cultural capital’ (1996), if not actually “inventing tradition”, to borrow Hobsbawm’s phrase (1983), then at least certainly bending history to their own ends.

Indeed, while there is no disputing the influence and involvement of the members of Sound Unlimited on the early days of Hip Hop in Sydney, during the course of my research their star was somewhat on the wane. Upon release, their album was condemned critically by both the mainstream press and by Hip Hop aficionados. Its slick, heavily instrumental production and the claims made by the crew to represent Sydney Hip Hop were sticking points for many people in the scene. One rapper I spoke to took me to task for writing about Sound Unlimited, claiming that “they’re not the real thing, man”; others would only talk to me about Sound Unlimited “off the record”. Still others, generally the younger members of “the new (Sydney) school” simply dismissed them out of hand, suggesting that although respect was due to the West Side Posse, Sound Unlimited were out of touch, “up themselves” or simply “wack”. Poor sales of the album, and the subsequent financial burdens imposed by a major company record deal, resulted in the dissolution of the group in 1993, and the reformation of the crew under the name Renegade Funk Train the next year. Their comic-book history, in this light, can be understood in terms of a generational crisis: an attempt to seal their place in a history that was, in a real sense, moving along without them.
Behind the narrative pyrotechnics of Sound Unlimited's historiography, of course, there are oral histories for which the comic book hyperbole stands less as fabrication than as a poetically exaggerated trope. In the following pages, I will focus upon a particular 'ur-moment' recurring in personal narratives, and over time elevated to the status of foundational myth, about 'the origins of Sydney Hip Hop', and the nature of the appeal of this 'culture' to particular individuals. It is a moment which makes the Sound Unlimited claim to have "come" from "the future" to save a moribund scene seem a little less unlikely; a moment in which geographic distance (in which America is 'somewhere else') was displaced into temporal difference (in which America is 'ahead' of us in time), and in which temporal difference (the sequence of cultural 'events' unfolding over time in America) was collapsed into a pure moment of transmission (a video clip on Saturday morning television).

The 'standard narrative' of Sydney Hip Hop

Tricia Rose takes care to sort the three key Hip Hop practices into a chronological sequence: New York experienced graffiti first, then breaking, with rapping "the last element to emerge", around 1979 (Rose 1994: 51).

In Blaze's account, however, Australia got all three as a "package deal", a couple of years later. Wark's maxim, that "we no longer have roots, we have aerials" (1995: xiv) is, in this instance, entirely apposite. Across the polychrome Pacific (by way of Chelsea High St.) came Malcolm McLaren's "Buffalo Gals", and, more importantly, the film clip which accompanied the song.

McLaren had been lurking around New York in the late 1970s, seeking out 'hip' new acts, bringing break-dancers and rappers from the Bronx projects into downtown clubs to support his New Wave acts (Toop 1991: 132). The New York punk/new wave scene, and the related avant garde art scene had been quite attentive to
the nascent Hip Hop scene in the late 1970s. In 1980 New Wave group Blondie released “Rapture”, which included a rapped vocal (Jones 1994: 50), a number 1 hit in Australia; in 1981 Talking Heads spin-off funk group The Tom Tom Club released “Wordy Rappinghood” and “Genius of Love”, the latter being in turn sampled by Grandmaster Flash later that year (“It’s Nasty”) (Fernando 1994: 67, 69). Nelson and Gonzales preface their “Guide to Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture” (1991) with an interview with seminal Brooklyn “hip-hop renaissance man” (v) Fab 5 Freddy, in which he recounts how he brought “hip hop to the down town bohemian culture” in 1980 (vii). Toop accounts for the appeal of “rap” to the punk/downtown bohemian scene in terms of its being “irresistible as a genuine street culture created by disaffected youth . . . [having] . . . the double virtue of being romantic and daring yet easily packaged” (134).5

“Buffalo Gals”, a perky novelty hit from 1981, included McLaren’s nasal quasi-rap over a funky back-beat, a delivery owing more to rural American square-dance calling than to the urban raps of The Sugar Hill Gang or Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Toop, interestingly describes the song as “a hip hop inspired melange of rap, Latin, Appalachian and Zulu music” (134), already effacing the syncretic nature of rap, positing it instead as an originary form of level standing with ‘Latin’, ‘Zulu’ and so on. However, for audiences in Sydney, what apparently most stood out about this clip was not the music, but, at least in the first instance, the break-dancing, and then the graffiti art that formed the background against which the dancing was shot (Bil Blast’s ‘Sky’s the Limit’ is pictured on pages 20-21 of Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff’s 1987 book Spraycan Art). I asked Blaze how, at the age of 14 in 1983, he first encountered ‘Hip Hop’, and what it was that lead him to reach a level of involvement with what he calls ‘the culture of Hip Hop’ that enabled him to make the claim, in 1992, that “I don’t think any other way [than Hip Hop]”. It wasn’t the music that appealed:

the song was [only] okay—“three buffalo girls go round

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Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

the outside” . . . [this Blaze recited somewhat unenthusiastically].

But the dancing . . .

It’s hard to explain—I mean, I just got into it because the dancing was like nothing I’d ever seen in my entire life, I just couldn’t believe that you could do that—roll around on the ground, it was astounding . . . Malcolm McLaren . . . it was just like no way in the world . . . it was like, whoah, how do you do that?

And the graffiti:

And there was a guy in the background like painting this big painting with a spray can and it was like, uh, what?

These things appeared to “go together”:

Here’s two things in one clip that I’m freaking out at and I then realised what he was doing was painting, and I realised that what the guys were doing on the ground, like watching it over and over again—thank god we had a video recorder in those days—and I kept hitting the rewind and it was like nothing that I’d ever seen in Australia . . .

Mediascape and technoscape coalesced for a moment: the technology was available for Blaze to record and to replay the break-dancers, iterating the (fictive? McLarenesque?) space of Manhattan in his family lounge room, effortlessly (re)-territorialising his bedroom floor, soon to be awash with album covers, clipped articles, pencilled outlines, and eventually his own page layouts, and in the school yard, where he burnt his back and joints copying—no, not copying—performing the break moves he had studied.

There followed the “realisation”, he explained, that all of these practices were dimensions of “the one culture”. This perceived cultural totality bound breaking, rapping and writing together, allowing multiple points of entry into that ‘culture’, as I have
suggested. 'Hip Hop', as this 'cultural' substrate became known, "offered something to everyone": if you couldn't break you could write graffiti, if you couldn't write, you could rap.

Blaze grew up on Sydney’s Lower North Shore, an affluent, middle class part of the city, and attended a private Catholic boys’ school. The ‘otherness’ of this vision of The Bronx put together by McLaren had instant appeal. For Blaze, the local music ‘scene’ (Straw 1991) held no attraction:

all that sort of Aussie rock and roll guitar stuff, smoking dope down the street—I mean, I just can’t stand guitars—but this . . . it [the world of the video clip] was just totally, it was so alien . . .

Blaze went on to recount how he and a handful of friends set about teaching themselves to break. The breaking in the clip is primarily the Bronx style break-beat, Latin-influenced acrobatics, exciting ground moves and spins, as Blaze’s account suggests. He explained that “everybody got into it for a while”. Those who, like Blaze, felt a particular attraction to breaking took the trouble to “research” it a bit more, and “to learn the skills”. The research was abetted by a handful of local DJs who, broadcasting on the A.B.C.’s ‘alternative’, or ‘youth oriented’ radio station 2 JJJ, played the latest rap tracks (often late at night, on specialist programmes, thereby contributing to a sense of ‘underground’). Commercial radio stations, of course, would not touch the stuff.

The need to ‘research’ Hip Hop recurs in accounts like Blaze’s. Another rapper explained:

We’ve been into the culture for a while we know what we’re talking about. I don’t want people to come up to me and say “man you’re not black you can’t rap”, man that’s bullshit man I can prove that I’ve got skills and I’ve analysed the culture, you know, I’ve studied it, it’s a part of me and I respect it for all it is.7

For many, the interest in breaking or graff flagged; for them it was, in the words of Def Wish Cast “just a faze” (from “Perennial
Cross Swords” on *Knights of the Underground Table*). But Blaze and his friends, and the hundreds of other Hip Hop aficionados spread across the suburbs, often in isolation, would meet at the few record shops that stocked, or were prepared to import the Sugar Hill or, later, Def Jam and Tommy Boy recordings. They would start to hang out together, formed crews and posses based upon the New York models of Hip Hop social organisation (see Castleman 1982). Blaze and others argue that rather than being the cultural tabula rasa upon which the mercantile hand of American cultural imperialism inscribed commodity desire, they created a demand for high-top shoes, shell-tops and track pants: the soon to be ubiquitous Nikes and Adidas runners. This argument, forcefully stated against a perceived ‘mainstream’ accusation of cultural imperialism, holds that the commodification of these styles came later.

Tags started appearing, and then pieces; breakers met in parks, rolling out strips of lino, or on the smooth outdoor terraces of office blocks to bust moves to the latest cassettes. One famous venue was a newly constructed block in the satellite C.B.D. of Parramatta, close to the geographical and demographic centre of Greater Sydney. The architects had thoughtfully provided external power sockets: boom-boxes and ghetto blasters could be plugged in; and the smooth granite surface was ideal for the ground moves of the burgeoning local break-dancing scene.

This was the halcyon golden age of Sydney Hip Hop: the quasi-mythologised underground “dayz”, prior to “sell-outs” and the “divisions” which, as we will see below, supposedly characterise more recent attempts to maintain the scene. Like any golden age, it is remembered as a time of unity, despite the (rather embellished) accounts of rumbles and inter-crew rivalry (a famous episode was recounted to me several times: a massive “war” in a central Sydney square, involving—accounts vary—between 200 and a dozen b-boys stepping to each other. As near as I could tell, it would seem that the latter figure is closer to the truth). Within the discourse of Hip Hop, of course, such rivalries
are markers of authenticity. The geographical diffusion of Hip Hoppers across the vast expanses of Greater Sydney mitigated against the rigidly observed territoriality of inner-urban (African)-American Hip Hop, although a specific Hip Hop geographics did emerge, mobilising discourses of socio-economic marginalisation to privilege the western suburbs of Sydney as the authentic originary site of Sydney Hip Hop: the experience of the ghetto, the discourse of 'hood and homies was translated to this sprawling landscape of quarter acre blocks and freestanding homes. The train-lines laced across this topographical space became the trajectories or vectors of a displaced territorialisation: writers strove to become 'king of the line', the suburban trains carrying their tags hundreds of miles around the city (see below, p244).

One of Sound Unlimited's rappers, Kode Blue, offered an account of his first encounter with Hip Hop that is virtually identical to Blaze's:

The first thing that got me into it was the first time I saw that video for "Buffalo Gals". I saw the breaking. I guess just physically, you know, being a kid, being into sports, I straight away picked up on the dance . . . 8

Vlad, also of Sound Unlimited, confirms the account:

I think most kids had their first exposure to Hip Hop from the whole "Buffalo Gals" thing.

The third male rapper in Sound Unlimited was Rosano (El Assassin) Martinez. As they did in Blaze's account, rock music 'scenes' appear in his account of Sydney in the early 1980s:

All the people that I used to know living around the city used to be into rockabilly and other forms of rock music . . . the same sort of kids . . . I see them now in the clubs dancing to Hip Hop, so I guess it took a while to actually hit the city. And people like that used to knock, make fun of what we were into, and the same sort of people are into it now.
Several important features emerge from these accounts. First, Rosano makes a claim for the longevity of Hip Hop: similarly to Blaze, he suggests that 'Hip Hop' is categorically distinguishable from other scenes. That is to say, he implicitly premises that there is 'something more' to Hip Hop, evidencing this through a claim to Hip Hop's apparent longevity: the fact that it has survived proves that it exists as a culture, as it were.

Second, the references to "the city" point to the specificity of the Sydney Hip Hop scene, manifested in the 'regionalisation' of the sprawling urban expanses of greater Sydney into (allegedly) distinct pseudo-neighbourhoods: what I shall call the 'West-Side' phenomenon. The project of bringing the Western Suburbs of Sydney into visibility has been one of the more interesting and extraordinary aspects of the local Hip Hop scene. It is a project grounded in discourses of 'the urban' borrowed from those circulating throughout African-American Hip Hop, and has, necessarily, socio-economic dimensions. I will return to this in some detail later, as the negotiation of this suburban context of Sydney Hip Hop with the folklorically recognised inner-city 'ghetto' 'origins' of Hip Hop has informed the subsequent development of the scene. Additionally, the tension set up between those in the local scene who claim a socio-economic identification with urban African-American Hip Hop (that is, constitute themselves in their discourses as members of disadvantaged, discriminated against, or even oppressed class, ethnic and geographical populations) and those who are perceived as having more 'middle class' backgrounds has considerably informed the micropolitical negotiations and conflicts that continue to shape the scene, negotiations which circulate around the perceived relative 'right' to claim status within the ambit of the putative 'true' Hip Hop Culture.

Third, in Kode Blue's account, the reference to sporting prowess invokes the specifically masculinised nature of the Hip Hop Culture. Rosano's sister, Tina ('T-Na'), was also a member of Sound Unlimited, and took pains to make it clear that the early days of
the Hip Hop Community in Sydney did not exclusively belong to the boys:

There were girls that break-danced, and popped, and rapped, and were into the whole thing, yeah . . .

Other writers have explained to me that girls were less likely to get involved in graffiti because “you have to be able to run fast to get away from the transits [police]”. Another (female) informant explained to me that boys only got into rapping to attract girls, an idea supported by a writer who told me that one of the main benefits of being a bomber was that whenever he and his crew went to a nightclub, they would attract attention: “You’d always pick up . . . there’d be fifty wogs and three of us bombers would walk in and all the girls, you know how girls go for the rebellious ones . . .”

The same female informant, Heidi, also suggested that girls involved in the scene tended to get pregnant, and were unable to maintain their commitment to the scene. Heidi was one of the original active break-dancers and writers, “into” Hip Hop “from the beginning”, as she told me. Now in her early thirties, Heidi has turned her back on Hip Hop, pursuing a more general interest in ‘black music’ as an importer, distributor and broadcaster. When I spoke to her, she was quite dismissive of ‘the Hip Hop Community’, adopting a nostalgic tenor. The new generation of rappers and writers claiming to be ‘the Hip Hop Community’ were mere shadows of those committed in the old days. Rhymers such as the Lounge Room crews (she didn’t name names, but the implication was clear) were really only playing at being rappers: “none of that freestyle stuff is really improvised,” she told me.

When I asked her how and why people, and particularly boys, originally “got into” Hip Hop, Heidi explained that “it’s a psychological thing . . . they’re all missing something. You look at them . . . most of them come from broken families . . . and they tend to be not very intelligent . . .” The discourses of community/belonging and self-expression that circulate within
and around Hip Hop, then, on such an understanding, have a tangible appeal, providing a kind of surrogate family, and a sense of creativity and expression, or, in Heidi’s terms a justification for what she now thinks of as puerile self-aggrandisement (rapping) and (at best) mediocre art and vandalism (graffiti). There certainly is something in this explanation, although Heidi was perhaps being a little harsh; since her own days as a breaker she had become a devout Christian, and married her long-standing boyfriend, who has put his own writing days far behind. They still spoke fondly of the old days, he of the warrants still outstanding for his arrest, of the midnight chases and the breaking battles. But they both admitted that many of the stories of huge gang wars and so on were exaggerations.

In all these accounts, Hip Hop in Sydney enjoyed an initial efflorescence, involving a period of broad, faddish appeal. Over time, *half-steppers* fell by the way-side, to follow the next (fashionable) “thing” that came up. Only true believers remained, and were often persecuted for their commitment. Forced *underground*, misunderstood, working hard to stay true and to maintain the Culture, these people felt their commitment to Hip Hop to have withstood a series of tests. That they had remained true, they would explain, demonstrated the truth of Hip Hop, and had earned the right to tell the story to subsequent generations.

Holston’s comments, quoted above, regarding the ‘illicit’ nature of genealogies’, are certainly overstated. Perhaps ‘suspect’ would be a better word. Since Foucault, of course, it has become if not an orthodox, then at least a commonplace methodological procedure to subject historiographical projects to a contextualising scrutiny. Recent reactions to the influence of what are styled as French critical theoretical perspectives have argued that implicit in such positions is a desire to ‘kill’ history. Keith Windschuttle (1994), for example, argues that a fashionable ‘historical
relativism', derived from what he calls 'the salons of Paris' pervades Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Media Studies and History Departments. He argues a media-friendly 'common-sense' counter-position: writing history is simply a process by which 'facts' are established, a process which 'we' (historians) are getting better at over time. Against this reactionary current, it is important that I clarify exactly why it is that I do not want to concern myself with a verifiable, documentary history of Hip Hop in Sydney.

To place the question of the 'history' of the Sydney Hip Hop experience under erasure, as it were, is not to deny the 'truth' or otherwise of events, moments or biographies constituting that history. Rather, I simply want to argue that what is most significant, for my purposes, about the history of Sydney Hip Hop is the manner in which an historical narrative is adduced in the ethnographic present, in order to locate particular agents in positions of authority and within a discourse of authenticity. An accepted, or 'instituted' history becomes an orthodoxy, the history, which can be used to define generic boundaries, excluding some texts, practices or agents, including others. This is an ongoing process, negotiated in a developing field of flux, characterised by change and overdetermined by a number of discourses and interests. I argue that what I style as 'the standard narrative' of local Hip Hop holds a particular significance, constituting one of the principle determinants of this process.

My account of this 'standard narrative', then, is not concerned with what 'actually happened' as much as it is with what is generally held, by the 'community of investigators', to have happened. 'Authority' within the scene to a large degree derived from this kind of historical sub-cultural capital: either a claim to 'have been there', or a double claim: first, to have knowledge, albeit second hand, of what happened, and second, to argue that one's current practice ad-equates to, or is consistent with that history. Obviously, a claim to first-hand experience is very powerful; such a claim, however, can be challenged on a number of grounds: the
person claiming to have been there is often accused of simply lying ("they wouldn’t know . . . they weren’t really there . . .") and so on). Alternatively, a person might be accused of embellishing or romanticising past events, endowing them with a scale or significance that, it might be counter-claimed, they did not deserve. Additionally, it is also the case that ‘standard narratives’, once in place, generate novel recollections, which over time substitute for personal remembrances. There is nothing deliberately ‘illicit’ in such cases: the ‘false’ memories are recollected in a mode of genuine belief: and it is with these beliefs, and their material impact upon the ethnographic present that I am concerned.

One such instance is the central role played by the McLaren clip in the standard narrative. It is almost impossible to verify whether every claim that a viewing of this clip was the catalyst for a devotion to Hip Hop is ‘true’. It was, however, generally accepted that this event had such an impact. Writers and rappers who would only have been three years old at the time ‘recall’ this moment: “well, it all started with the ‘Buffalo Gals’ thing . . .” In effect, this collective recollection is synecdochital, the film clip standing as a signifier of origin.

This access to narratives of origin, and, more importantly, the possibility of locating one’s self in that narrative, had a particular repercussion upon the scene shortly after my fieldwork ended. One night, a ‘freestyle’ session held at an inner city club, described by Miguel d’Souza, in his weekly column in the street magazine 3-D World as “the public unveiling of Sydney’s new school, young rappers, too young to ever recall the origins of Sydney’s rap scene and the irrationality and occasional violence it was associated with” (3-D World no 217, October 17, 1994: 26), was disrupted by a DJ and rhymer who apparently claimed that the organisers were not the ‘real thing’, that they were, more or less, imitating a lost authentic Hip Hop practice, available, apparently, only to those who were ‘there’ originally. The evening ended in violence, fulfilling the fears of the club management, who
had offered their venue on the understanding that rhymers and aficionados “these days” were more interested in pursuing the aesthetico-cultural aspects of Hip Hop than with hard core homeboy attitude.

This was quite a significant event. The organisers of the night in question had hosted a series of very successful freestyle nights at The Lounge Room. These monthly gatherings had proved so popular, in fact, that a new, larger venue was required. The popular understanding of rap music and Hip Hop as being associated with violence, however, meant that very few venues were prepared to take the risk of hosting a rap night. This association of rap with violence, of course, is a commonplace (see section on media images of rap, below). Many within the scene, particularly those promoting Hip Hop as ‘Culture’, argue that it is “all media hype”, or at least exaggerated scare mongering (while, it must be admitted, enjoying the aura of hardness that such hype lends them). The violence (a microphone allegedly stolen, a scuffle, threats, and a door demolished with a baseball bat) at The Good Bar that night confirmed worst fears and effectively ended the burgeoning freestyle scene.

Clearly, the antagonistic DJ, a figure of some renown from the early days of Sydney rap, felt that his own position, his own authority was under threat from the self-styled new school of freestyle rappers. This new school took its lead from recent developments in West Coast and New York rap, and understood itself within a developmental paradigm, interpreting Hip Hop as an ‘evolving’ culture, recognising earlier mistakes and presenting Hip Hop in a ‘positive’ light. This was understood, from some quarters, as a usurpation, as being not sufficiently respectful to those who had ‘been there’ from the beginning.

It is also significant that the divide between these generational factions was also marked in terms of, on one hand, an appeal to straight-forward experience (“we were there, you weren’t”), and on the other, an appeal to superior knowledge (“that may be how it was, but what it should be is . . .”). Cutting across this set of
arguments was a discourse of class: the older generation would argue that while their Hip Hop practice had been authentic because it emerged out of a genuine privation (the under-resourced West, and so on—see below pp244 ff), the 'new school' were engaged in the culture at the level of the dilettante, were from markedly more middle class backgrounds, and were only interested in Hip Hop now that it was more accessible, respectable, mainstream, claims hotly disputed. There was no risk, now, of being 'into' Hip Hop, unlike 'back in the dayz'. The 'new school' argued that they were closer to 'the spirit' of Hip Hop, that their authenticity derived from a superior understanding of what Hip Hop meant.

The processes of establishing a history of the local Hip Hop scene was critical in terms of supporting the thesis of 'Hip Hop as Culture', rather than as 'fad'. It has not my intention to produce here a 'correct' historical account of the period following the watershed Malcolm McLaren video. I am less concerned, for example, to determine absolutely the circumstances of the role that the "Buffalo Gals" clip played in creating the possibility of a Hip Hop Community in Sydney than to note and assess the discursive fact that the clip has come to stand for a moment of origin, in which, to borrow the metaphorical schema which Rose uses to describe the totality of the Hip Hop experience, the smooth flow of genealogical history, so contested and debated by academics and Hip Hop historians alike, is interrupted, displaced, relocated to the Antipodes, in a moment of pure "rupture in line" (Rose, 38), or, to use Appadurai's (1990) term, of 'disjunction'. The specificity of the development of the Hip Hop scene in Sydney also mitigates against a reading within the paradigm which understands the specificity of sub-cultural phenomena as direct 'expressions' of underlying, determining contradictions in the economic base. This is not, of course, to deny the contributory impact, and partially constraining and determining effect of the socio-economic context, but to suggest that dynamics other than those of class were at work (see below, pp78-84). The point here has been that local experience was, effectively, gauged against,
‘read’ in relation to, informed by and generated from cultural material ‘arriving’ from another place.

In the next section, I want to turn to Appadurai’s model of the generation of cultural phenomena which recognises this increasing significance of mediation and disjunctions operative at a global scale for the production of local ‘worlds’. Through the course of this examination, I will turn the Appadurian model inside-out, demonstrating that social agents are not merely subject to the global flow of cultural material, but become the (active) subjects of texts and practices which enter into complex, co-creative relationships with that material, as part of the on-going process of making culture.

Footnotes

1 Other important texts include Tricia Rose’s contribution (1994) is an efficient critical overview, and will, no doubt, stand as the standard text in the area. Other useful sources include Nelson and Gonzales’ encyclopedic Bring the Noise (1991) and Adler’s photo-directory of prominent rap personalities (1991). Texts such as Nelson and Gonzales, Adler, Hager and Toop, all very accessible, engagingly written and liberally illustrated, were popular in the Sydney scene. Thompson’s essay on break-dancing (1986) is salutary; Costello and Wallace’s relentlessly reflexive post-modern ‘sampler’ (1990; see below), on the other hand, is mostly of value as a curiosity.

2 As a valuable adjunct to Gilroy’s account of the flow of cultural material across the North-Western hemisphere, Richard Waterhouse has produced a fascinating history of processes of trans-Pacific cultural exchange in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the North American vaudeville circuit included an Australian leg. Acts toured from America to Australia, and from Australia to America. Many African-American artists took advantage of the apparently more sympathetic and tolerant cultural milieu to settle in Australia, and continue their careers ‘down under’ (see Waterhouse 1990 and 1995).

3 Spencer, summarising such defences of the “irruption of subjugated knowledges” into discourse, quotes Sartre’s Black Orpheus “What did you expect when you unbound the gag that had muted those black mouths?” (1991, 4). For a counter-argument to these defences, see Peterson-Lewis, 1991 (collected in the same volume as Spencer’s essay).

4 The 1980 Talking Heads album Remain In Light also featured a rap in the song “Cross-Eyed and Painless”. It is also interesting to note that in 1981 Talking Heads front man David Byrne, in collaboration with English producer Brian Eno, pioneered sampling methodologies in recording My Life in the Bush of Ghosts. The album used looped samples from sources such as proto-World Music recordings, radio call-in shows, broadcast

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sermons and so forth, which were layered over synthesised and 'live' drums, funky bass lines and guitars, creating very much a 'hip hop-type' sound.

5 Hebdige has also charted out a comparable 'alliance' between English punk and reggae (Hebdige 1979, 1987). It should be noted that the New York punk scene of the late 1970s was qualitatively very different to that of London. Arguably, where the London scene found its initial impetus amongst an underemployed, alienated youth underclass (Hebdige 1979), the New York scene enjoyed a somewhat bohemian art-crowd appeal from the start, dating from The Velvet Underground's involvement with Andy Warhol's Factory project (Heylin 1993) Marcus (1989) and Savage (1991) offer re-readings of the English punk scene, the former placing seminal punks The Sex Pistols within a narrative of somewhat highbrow counterculture movements, including Dadaism and the Situationists, while the latter stresses the role of "actively interventionist journalism" (Hayward 1992a: 85) in firing up the scene. This reading in particular, points to the inadequacy of analyses of late Twentieth Century cultural movements premised largely upon class correlates.

6 See below pp 84ff.

7 Quote taken from Miguel d'Souza's radio documentary "Sydney Hip Hop" broadcast on public broadcaster 2 SER-FM, July 1994 (Coolie Boy Productions).

8 Interview conducted with Sound Unlimited by Nikki Bambrick, July 1993 (see Maxwell and Bambrick 1994).

9 To 'freestyle' is to improvise a rap. See Glossary.
Part 2: ‘Global Cultural Flows’

There is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out’, namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do ‘set-out’—a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would.

C. S. Peirce “What Pragmatism Is” (5.416)

Where You Find Yourself

In the introduction, above, I used in passing the Heideggerian notion of ‘thrown-ness’ to describe a state of being in which persons ‘find’ themselves: the ‘facticity’ of their being. In shifting from European existential phenomenology to pragmatic American phenomenology, I want to qualify the rather grand metaphysics of this construction by reference to what I take as the arche-statement of Peirce’s pragmatism. In the following sections I want to map out the “mass of cognition” with which the social agents engaged in constituting ‘Hip Hop’ in Sydney “are laden”. “A human life”, writes Michael Jackson,

is seldom a blind recapitulation of givenness, but an active relationship with what has gone on before and what is imagined to lie ahead (1996: 11)

I would qualify this formulation by suggesting that that which “has gone on before” loses none of its efficacy through also being “imagined”. “Culture”, on Jackson’s account

cannot be set over or against the person. Rather, it is the field of a dialectic in which the sedimented and anonymous meanings of the past are taken up as a means of making a future” (11)
I have already introduced *ideoscape* and *mediascape* as two key concepts, drawn from Arjun Appadurai's model for the analysis of 'global cultural flows' (1990). Appadurai's work provides a framework with which to organise the physical and discursive material constituting the field of the dialectic to which Jackson is referring. I will stress at the outset this organisational aspect of Appadurai's fairly thematic model: I am using it to sort out the wealth of material that I wish to analyse, and to constitute that material as a series of contexts, resources, positionings and constraints operating upon the agents whose labour of cultural production is my principle concern. That actual 'labour' of cultural production will in turn be analysed in terms of social semiotics: a co-creative process in which agents negotiate, dispute, and institute 'meaning' across a variety of semiotic systems, and wherein the processes of negotiation, contestation, interpretation and institution will be understood as operating in specific agonistic contexts, themselves readable in terms of a micro-physics of power.

I will use Appadurai's schema to not only develop an understanding of the context within which the Sydney Hip Hop scene produced itself, but also to discuss some features and 'products' (texts, discourses of various kinds) of the scene itself, and the complex means by which various aspects of this process operate dialectically, or perhaps, better, reflexively, or to borrow from the kinds of biological metaphors that chaos theory (cited by Appadurai: 21) has appropriated, in terms of complex 'feedback' mechanisms, implicating various layers of influence, not the least of which, as I have already suggested, is the presence and intervention of the researcher.

Appadurai’s contention is that the “modern world . . . is now an interactive system in a sense that is strikingly new” (1990: 1). So massively new, he suggests, that by comparison, the effects of the development of print technologies upon the development of the modern nation state (Anderson 1991) are “only modest”
Reading Meyerowitz's less than celebratory account of cultural processes in the age of mass media against McLuhan's premature communitarian optimism, Appadurai looks towards a spatial metaphors borrowed in part from Deleuze and Guattari, in part from Jameson, and in part from Pico Iyer. In moving beyond a conventional marxian understanding, Appadurai displaces political economy from its status as determinant of cultural processes, opening up the possibility of an understanding of those processes as being informed by a "much subtler play of indigenous trajectories of desire and fear" (3).

Appadurai proposes an "elementary framework" for exploring the "new global cultural economy". This framework seeks to determine the specificity (the 'particularity', to pinch Wark's term, see p47 above) of any given cultural formation in terms of the discontinuities constituted in each specific circumstance through the "relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flow":

"(a) ethnoscapes; (b) mediascapes; (c) technoscapes; (d) finanscapes; and (e) ideoscapes" (6-7)

The specificity of any given "imagined world", defined as "the worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups", is given by the play of difference and disjunction between these -scapes as they pertain to a given context. "[T]he individual actor," then,

is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part by their own sense of what these landscapes offer (7).

The mismatches between, for example, the 'ideoscope' of (African-American) Hip Hop, carrying with it particular discourses of ethnicity, and the ethnoscapes of contemporary Sydney is an absolutely critical axis for analysis, not simply to weigh the respective scenes, or imaginaries, against each other with a view to discussing 'authenticity', or 'culture' in a reified sense, but
because these disjunctions are experienced as impediments (or points of contact, to be sure) to processes of identification, requiring of interpretation and reconciliation. Or, as Appadurai has it, of "navigation".

Additionally, the model addresses the inadequacies of both an orthodox marxian reductionist account of cultural processes (what Appadurai calls the "globalizing marxist analysis" op. cit.) and of 'post-modern' understandings predicated upon an assumption of free textual play. The bulk of cultural theory from Marxism through to post-colonialism has privileged class or race, or a combination of the two, as the determinants of cultural phenomenon. One of the main trajectories of Birmingham-school sub-culture studies was towards a 'double-articulation' of class and race as determinants in the final instance, a move subsequently developed through McRobbie (in particular, but amongst others)'s sustained assertion that sex/gender should also be factored into such accounts. Appadurai's model, on the other hand, allows for a range of determinants to operate within a particular cultural field without a necessary reduction in the final instance to an ontologically privileged ground, although, as Appadurai argues, one specific dimension may exercise a contingent dominance at any particular historical moment.

Now, given this, my discussion of the 'ethnoscape' and 'financescape' will be determined by the salience of questions and discourses of race and economics for the people involved in Hip Hop in Sydney; these issues are indeed highly significant within that field in that they constitute axes around which knowledge and practice is organised. They cannot, however, be understood as being generative of the cultural phenomena in question.

Most of the analysis below will be of the mediascape of Sydney Hip Hop. My concern will be to explicate both the media material, and the implications for the practice of 'everyday' Hip Hop life, Hip Hop embodiment, social being and knowledges of the media. I will, in the course of this explication, use the written, sonic, graphic (and embodied) material and performances produced by the local
scene to develop an understanding of what I will call 'the Ideoscape of Sydney Hip Hop'.

**Financescape**

Appadurai suggests that the limitations of economics as a discipline are revealed by the increasingly "mysterious, rapid and difficult [to follow]" disposition of global capital. The 'traditional' indicators and comparisons constituting that discipline's grounds are still useful, however, insofar as they are understood in terms of complex interactions with the ethnoscapes and technoscapes, and refracted by the mediascapes and ideoscapes. Hence, Appadurai offers 'finanscape': "Political economy must take into account the deeply disjunctive relationship between human movement, technological flow and financial transfers" (9). For my purposes, this formulation recognises the partial, contingent determination of cultural formations by socio-economic status, simultaneously recognising that any reduction of such formations to questions of class is potentially, if not inevitably inadequate. In terms of my own research, the appeal of Hip Hop culture unquestionably extends across socio-economic backgrounds and contexts with this proviso: there is a generally circulated and accepted narrative within the Hip Hop scene which accounts for the 'origins' of Hip Hop Culture within a narrative of class, and, of course, colour: Hall's famous 'double articulation'. This narrative produces discourses of 'appropriateness', and, concomitantly, axes of dispute along which micro-political struggles for the right to participate in and speak for Hip Hop Culture are conducted. The broad identification of Sydney's Western Suburbs as 'working class', for example, constitutes the grounds upon which Hip Hop activists from those suburbs make their claim to Hip Hop authenticity, as I argue.
Ethnoscape

On Appadurai's account, the 'ethnoscape' is "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world" (7). Now, Appadurai's work specifically deals with displaced populations: "tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers": his analysis is expressly concerned with these and other "moving groups", qualifying this concern by noting that

[t]his is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks, of kinship, of friendship, of work and of leisure, as well as of birth, residence and other filiative forms (7).

But everywhere, he continues, "the warp of such stabilities is shot through with the woof of human motion".

It is possible to view all but a tiny minority of the population of contemporary Australia in terms of such an understanding: a population of displaced peoples, all, to a greater or lesser degree, immigrants. And although this may be, perhaps, a stretch, it will be an illuminating one. The main benefit for my purposes of introducing this category is to isolate question of ethnic origin, displacement, marginality, belonging, identification and so on as one critical dimension along, through, or across which, the labour of cultural production takes place. Discourses of ethnicity, of colour, of racial origin and of the racial aetiology of specific practices figure largely in academic, popular and insider discussions about and accounts of Hip Hop; already I have touched upon them. Here is one Sydney writer’s testimony:

A lot of kids can associate with the Hip Hop culture because with like young Afro-American kids they see their heroes in the States doing the rhymes and stuff like that, and then Hispanics and Philippinos and stuff like that and Anglo-Saxons—wherever you’re from it’s like been part of who you are.

This writer offers an interesting take on the origins of Hip Hop:
when Hip Hop first came out it didn’t really matter where you were from, you know, it was like what you did. Then it went through a phase where the Afro-Americans were into strictly blackness, Public Enemy, X-Clan came out and it was like if you were white and were doing Hip Hop music you were a fake you know . . .

We have already seen Mick E and E.S.P.’s take on this (p55, above).

... but now it’s returning the old school people starting to learn their history people don’t really care where you’re from as long as you represent what you’ve got, you know. I mean I don’t really care if a rapper is black or white if he grabs the mike and he’s got the skills I’m going to give him respect.

I want to argue then, on ethnographic grounds, against too ready a reduction of the ‘causes’ of a local, Australian interest in ‘Hip Hop Culture’ to an effect of class or race (or both). Here is a grab from a Time (Australia) colour piece titled “Northern Exposure”:

Paul . . . is a Greek-Australian who talks like an African-American . . . [who makes] black American music, in accents borrowed from the ghetto, in a brick veneer home in Melbourne’s western suburbs (Button and Lyall 993: 52)?

Get used to these discourses: ethnic, working class kids borrow, or imitate American culture. This is the standard media take on Hip Hop down under. And look who gets quoted next:

McKenzie Wark . . . says rap first gained followers in Sydney “among ethnic kids from the suburbs who identified with the outsider element” (53).

My point is that this is only part of the story. For a start, one need not have been ‘ethnic’ or ‘suburban’ to have been interested in rap. There are, perhaps, other ways to be ‘other’. My own research confirms the breadth of appeal of rap music, across various socio-economic and ethnic (including ‘Anglo’) fractions of the population of Sydney.
However, things are more complicated than even that. For this kind of discourse, accurate or not, circulates within the scene. Debates raged over the appropriateness of people from what were perceived as being middle class backgrounds claiming Hip Hop authenticity, while those not from ‘the West Side’ (see below) argued vehemently that socio-economic status was irrelevant: that what counted was being ‘true’ to the ‘ideals’ of Hip Hop. This kind of assertion necessitated the finding, or the creation, of an ‘ideology’ of Hip Hop which literally transcended race and class; take for instance, Mick E’s subsumption of ethnic determination to a more abstract discourse of ‘respect’: it actually doesn’t matter whether or not you are black, as long as you are ‘representing . . . what you have got’, and do so with ‘skill’

At the same time, the figure of the funky black street dude loomed large. Invoking a discourse of desire which just barely masks a frank erotics, Mick explained that

all the little kids go for the American stuff straight away . . . they want to be black too.

Why?

Because black has now been portrayed as cool, and you know, the beautiful body . . .

E.S.P. listed the black movie and sports stars who are role models, and Mick confessed that

I remember when I was young [laughs]. I was the same, when I was getting into it all, I was um, I’d wish that I was black because then I could rap . . .

The construction of the western suburbs as either analogous to the African-American ethnic ghetto, or, as Symonds (1994) and Powell (1994) argue, simply as ethnic ghetto, has a particular significance for a discussion of the potential appeal of Hip Hop, allowing for a straight-forward mapping onto the Sydney context of discourses of African-American-ness, and facilitating a ‘folk theory’, particularly
evident in popular print and electronic media readings, of the appeal of Hip Hop to Australian 'kids' (as they are inevitably styled; see, for example, Guilliatt 1994, Gripper and Hornery 1996). This account understands Hip Hop's appeal in terms of its providing a subject position for otherwise marginal, unvoiced, ethnic minorities, and tends to effect precisely a mapping of ethnic otherness onto 'the west'.

And it is not only the 'mainstream' press pushing this line: Miguel d'Souza's articles in *3D World* stressed this angle as well. Miguel himself, as a second generation Pakistani\(^3\), had a particular investment in a politics of colour, and I do not want to deny for an instant that ethnicity was a significant feature of the Hip Hop scene in Sydney; plenty of Lebanese, South American and Pacific Islander (in particular) young men got into Hip Hop, performing raps in Arabic, in *Spanglish* and so on.

Ethnic-based groups such as the infamous Sons of Samoa (S.O.S.) and the United Tongan Boys (U.T.B.) styled themselves as *homeboys*, listened to gangsta-rap, and tagged, but were generally considered as not being appropriately 'into' Hip Hop by those 'in' the scene: their commitment was understood as being not to Hip Hop per se, but to their own ethnic loyalties. The Hip Hop scene that I encountered took pains to distance itself from these *gangs*, claiming that the *media* was generally too ready to misread what were actually superficial 'appearances', that the ethnic *gangs* were merely adopting the styles and bad-boy imagery of gangsta-rap without taking the trouble to understand the *culture* behind it. When I asked about these groups, it would be explained to me that they were at odds with the inclusionary ideology of Hip Hop, and gave Hip Hop a bad name. It was also claimed that the media and the police alike seemed to have great difficulty in distinguishing the relatively trivial criminal transgressions of *crews* of 'writers' from the big-league criminal activities of *gangs*.

There were as many, if not more, 'Anglo-Australian' boys involved in the Hip Hop scene I encountered. Importantly, it tended to be
these individuals who would promote the subsuming discourse of a ethnicity-inclusive Hip Hop Nation as a model for Hip Hop communality. This inclusive model frequently broke down: a group of Islanders rang up Miguel at his radio show and, not realising that he himself was a Pakistani-Australian warned him against playing hip hop because “it is a black [i.e. their] thing”, and Miguel himself would argue for the value of Hip Hop in encouraging otherwise unvoiced ethnic kids to follow the example of the similarly marginalised urban African-Americans, and to articulate (express) themselves, Anglo-Australian Ser Reck assures me that “they’ll tell you it’s a black thing, man, but it isn’t . . .” [fixing me with his gaze, index finger jabbing once, emphatically] “. . . it’s our thing”.

Elsewhere, Miguel had argued that

records from African-American rappers are to the Hip Hop Community a documentation of . . . missing histories, and so it is through Hip Hop that the culture is obtaining its black history (from Miguel’s radio documentary “Hip Hop Culture in Sydney”)

Miguel suggests that this “studied respect for African-American culture” has enabled “Australian Hip Hop fans” to “interpret their surroundings with the benefit of a black aesthetic”. By way of an example, Miguel points out that “Def Wish Cast have in the past incorporated Koori [Aboriginal] words into their raps”.

I saw two Aboriginal crews perform, both consisting solely of female members. The Aranta Desert Posse, from the Alice Springs area of Central Australia, performed at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum as part of an exhibition on the history of popular music in Australia. Three teenage girls, faces painted in “traditional style”, walked onto stage and performed a number of ‘traditional’ dance moves and read poetry, before repairing to the back of the stage to change into checked shirts and beanies, translating themselves, somewhat awkwardly, into a video-clip-informed embodiment of the urban ‘Hip-hopper’.

8 5
Closer to the imaginary of the ghetto, Black Justice lived in inner-city Redfern, one of the most concentrated centres of Aboriginal population in Sydney. Goie Wymarra and Paula Maling were politically active in their local area, and rapped about the White Invasion of Australia and AIDS (see Browne 1992):

Taking our land our souls our beliefs
Rape, murder and all the white lies
Resulting in black genocide
Clear the land with whiteman tools
With the land the stars the moon and the sun
They should have left us alone

40,000 years of living in peace
And now 200 years that peace has ceased
Motherland no longer smiles
Vanished bushland around for miles

They told me of Public Enemy visiting ‘The Block’, a ghetto precinct in Redfern; Chuck D spending hours with the black kids, giving away t-shirts and encouraging them to get political, while Flavor Flav sat in his limo and talked on his mobile phone. (In concert, PE had flown the Aboriginal flag from the stage). However, Black Justice had their tapes produced by a funk-dance musician, and were, Blaze explained to me, despite their adoption of black nationalist-rhetoric and air-punching hard-core performance embodiments, “not really Hip Hop.”

Rap music did appeal to Aboriginal youth; the manager of the only record shop in Redfern told me that rap records were popular with younger Kooris, but did not sell as well as country and western music! However, it is probably best not to over-emphasise any relationship between Hip Hop and Aboriginal Australians purely in terms of a logic of the colour of skin. Perhaps Miguel’s assessment is to the point: the benefit of the experience of (African-American) blackness afforded through and by the encounter with Hip Hop was that of giving “white Australian youth an understanding of
repression, isolation and blackness that they haven’t been privy to” (ibid).

In summary, ‘class’ (loosely defined) and ‘ethnicity’ did count, did have tangible effect upon the contested field of Hip Hop in Sydney. Moreover, these discourses often become entwined, race and class double-helically informing and contradicting each other as the proto-genetic material generating the form that a ‘social’ will take. And, indeed, the articulations of various subject positions within these ontologies are used as discursive weapons in the struggle for (sub)-cultural capital within and across that field (as do, it must be noted sex, and age), informing a fluid, arcane sub-cultural algebra—could Miguel’s blackness, for example, compensate for his middle-classness? However, although they do offer powerful figurations for the construction of communal identity and belongingness to a social imaginary, neither ‘class’ nor ‘ethnicity’ alone can offer either a determination in the final instance for the social phenomenon in question, nor a satisfactory account of the feeling of belongingness experienced by all those with whom I met or encountered.

Technoscape

Adding to these two dimensions of (partial) social determinacy, then, Appadurai uses the term “technoscape” to refer to “the global configuration . . . of technology . . . increasingly driven not by any obvious economies of scale, of political control, or of market rationality” (1990: 8). I use this rubric to consider the effects of the availability of certain technologies and to reflect upon the means by which those technologies and discourses about those technologies are taken up in the Hip Hop scene, without necessarily reducing the account to a technologistic one. The relatively parallel development and availability of sampling technologies in Australia and North America can be seen, for
example, as a contributing factor facilitating the translation of aspects of so-called Hip Hop Culture from North American contexts to Australian contexts. This is not, however, to suggest the manifestation of Hip Hop Culture in either place was 'driven' or determined by technology, understood in that sense. However, the proliferation of cheap synthesisers, the increasingly sophisticated technologies of dissemination of cultural material (the development, for example of the music video, as a virtually instantaneous means of circulating visual and aural material around the world in the early 1980s), the development of digital sound storage systems, leading to the fetishisation of vinyl records, and so on, can all be seen as contributing to the specificity of the Hip Hop experience.

**Mediascape**

The other terrains within or across which Appadurai considers the flow of global cultural material are, he writes, two "closely related landscapes of images" (1990: 9). The mediascape, Appadurai writes, refers to both

the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television studios, and film production), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these interests (9)

He continues:

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film and cassette forms) complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed (9).

These images, Appadurai suggests, tend towards blurring the "realistic and the fictional" in proportion to the (presumably both
spatial and temporal) distance, constituting imagined worlds which "constitute narratives of the Other and proto-narratives of possible lives" (9). The interplay between these territories is dense and almost inseparable. For now, however, I want to abstract from the melange of imagery this term, 'mediascape', to isolate some, and hopefully most, of the textual, visual and sonic sources which inform, surround, provide recombinative material for, the social agents operating within the Hip Hop scene.

The Mediascape and Hip Hop

The idea that authentic culture is somehow born outside media and commerce is a resilient one. In its full-blown romantic form, the belief suggests that grassroots cultures resist and struggle with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world.

Sarah Thornton 1996: 116

Angela McRobbie, advocating an approach to the study of youth subcultures which addresses "the material processes of cultural production" rather than the "final signifying products" (1993: 414), directed her own analysis towards a reading of the construction of femininity in 'girls' magazines', arguing that "as young consumers, girls are able . . . to exert some power in the marketplace" (415; also see McRobbie 1991). Following Bourdieu, in her analysis of 'club culture' in contemporary Britain, Thornton argues that "contrary to youth subcultural ideologies, 'subcultures' do not germinate from a seed . . . only to be belatedly digested by the media. Rather, media and other culture industries are there from the start" (1996: 117). And while "[s]ubcultures often define themselves against the mass media", those same media "are integral to youth's social and ideological formations" (116, my emphasis). The Hip Hop scene in Sydney had just such an ambivalent relationship with the media, both drawing upon and rejecting it in its various forms. Perhaps the most consistent
feature of the relationship of people in the Hip Hop scene with the media, however, was that they understood themselves as competent navigators of the media, able to distinguish 'the truth' from 'hype'.

The frequency with which 'media' images recur in the insider accounts of the Hip Hop scene has already been noted. From the ur-status accorded to the Malcolm McLaren "Buffalo Gals" film-clip to The Monk's dismissal of those boys who copy b-boy fashions (and the embodiments appropriate to those styles) from "their TV shows" and "what they see in the magazines", it is clear that the most distinctive feature of these social agents' construction of the world within which they operate is its thoroughly mediated nature.

In the following section I want to consider the resources, discursive, kinetic and pictorial, within which the social agents of the Sydney Hip Hop Scene create, and in the Foucauldian sense, are productively constrained by, in the creation of, their social imaginary and their embodied practice of being 'Hip Hop'. The main focus of the following explication of this Hip Hop mediascape will be on various materials informing and circulating around the scene, often in relationships characterised by complex circuitries of feed-back, intertextuality and reflexivity. I intend it as an ethnographic account, rather than an analysis of media; I am guided by the use and impact of the media upon the ethnographic subjects, emphasising the "[micro]-political struggles" (Hage 1995: 61) in which individuals in the scene are engaged as they negotiate and define their practice in terms of these contextualising discourses.

It is of no little significance that the standard account of the 'origins' of Hip Hop Culture in Sydney isolates, as its ur-moment, the screening, on local television music video shows sometime in the early 1980s, of McLaren's clip. However, as I have suggested, I am not particularly interested in this origin as an empirically verifiable fact: I am interested in it in so far as this video has become the standard departure point for the narration of the
'historical' experience of Hip Hop Culture in Sydney. I am interested in the thoroughly mediated nature of this experience of Hip Hop culture; in the ongoing processes of negotiating a flood of signifiers, in the desire to seek, or perhaps, if we are to accept a Baudrillian-type account of the loss of, and subsequent mourning for, authenticity in an increasingly simulated world, to retrieve fixities of meaning from out of the white noise of the 'vectors' and 'interzones' of global media (Wark 1995).

Over the following pages I want to map out this forcefield of the media, offering both an outline of the Hip Hop map of that field, and simultaneously, a partial account of the experience of the 'navigations' of that map by the cultural agents in question. I cannot hope to do so exhaustively, or hope to pin down with absolute certainty generative relationships between cause and effect. Rather, I will offer a somewhat stochastic diagram, and in so doing, we will be able to move towards an understanding of the operation of agents negotiating and making sense of what I will provisionally call a 'post-modern' world, drawing attention to the manner in which these agents resist a dissolution of fixed meanings by articulating values and knowledges to particular signifying systems, articulating these values in turn to posited transcendental signifieds, arresting the flow of pure difference, effecting a closure, a suture over the aporia of infinite semiosis. In this present example, this transcendental signified is called (Hip Hop) Culture: an essence held to constitute a unifying, generative, ontological principle. The institution of interpretations of stylistic and aesthetic identities across a variety of practices constitute, within this suturing process, 'iconicities of style', which are understood, by the agents in question, as operating in terms of a generative economy of representation, further evidencing the fundamentally 'representative' status of those practices. As I shall demonstrate, break-dancing, graffiti writing and rapping, notwithstanding their distinct, independent genealogies, are all understood as being identical in status in relation to a presumed, substantial cultural essence, of which they are expressions. In a real sense, to break is to write is to rap: all are manifestations; in
the language of the scene itself, to engage in any of these activities is simply to *represent the culture*.

The local Hip Hop press itself constitutes a specifically ‘Hip Hop Mediascape’, consisting of the international and local Hip Hop press, rap recordings and album notes, interviews, films, internet bulletin boards and so on. This Hip Hop Mediascape is itself characterised by an intertextuality, and is engaged antiphonically with the mediascape-at-large. It at once ‘operates’ to provide a ‘repertoire of images’ and texts for agents engaged in the scene and, at the same time, as a medium through which those agents articulate themselves, thereby engaging dialogically with this repertoire. In addition, ‘mass’ media material flows around and into the Hip Hop field, providing images against which Hip Hop agents can define themselves by exclusion (“the media get it wrong” being a popular refrain), or by identification (I frequently witnessed writers and rappers exploiting the media demonisation of ‘rap’ and ‘gangsters’ to generate ‘tough’ habituses). In a more general sense, the mass media provides a massive resource from which is drawn imagery and textual material for raps and discourse about, for example, the imaginary of America. Further, in reading the media ‘products’ of the scene, we can discern a critique of the mediascape within the context of which these social agents themselves make texts, and through those critiques glimpse the processes of ‘distinction’ through which those agents make sense of that mediascape.

There are, then, two orders of mediascape to be considered here. First, the general mediascape within which the social agents engaged in the Hip Hop Scene are themselves ‘located’, and second the specifically ‘Hip Hop Mediascape’, which recombines, critiques and otherwise engages with the general mediascape. Bringing with it all the attendant, reifying baggage of such a list, a provisional typology would include:
A The Mediascape-at-large

1. ‘The Mass Media’.

a) Here I am perhaps closest to Appadurai’s understanding of mediascape as a repertoire of images. The mass media offers an array of images, texts, understandings and so on, from which the social agents involved in Hip Hop draw in order to produce their own material. Sometimes celebrated as a post-modern form *par excellance* (cf Wark 1992), Hip Hop as a musical recording practice seems to operate through a playful *pastiching* of material from various sonic sources: the process known as sampling. And of course, Hebdige (1979) understood ‘punk’ subculture as being informed by a wilful *bricolage* of fashion, embodiments, beliefs and practices, recombined in order to wage a counter-hegemonic ‘semiotic guerilla warfare’. I want to preserve some of these notions by considering the diversity of sources from which the cultural agents I followed drew their material, but understanding these (re)-compositional practices as being determined, however, less by a playful post-modernism, a cutting-and-pasting of cultural material from a *maelstrom* of undifferentiated signification (Baudrillard 1983) than by a careful attention to narratives and social practices.

b) A sub-set of mass-media images pertaining directly to Hip Hop and to African American urban culture.

c) A sub-set of mass media textualisations specifically addressed Hip Hop itself took two forms:

i) Press and electronic media reportage concerned with the conflated issues of a supposed incipient ‘Americanisation’ of a putatively authentic local youth culture and criminality. Here I will consider the effects of these discourses on the scene itself, particularly the evident pleasure taken in the construction of those involved in Hip Hop, graffiti, rap as outlaws, dangerous, counter-hegemonic.
ii) Hip Hop (and attendant phenomena) represented in advertising and in local television production.

Both these aspects of the mediascape are particularly important in that they each provided what were often construed within the scene (often quite correctly, as I will argue) as 'misconceptions', against which a sense of communal identity could then be predicated.

2. Academic writing on Hip Hop.

Here my concern is two-fold. First, I want to consider the scene's contact with academic writings on Hip Hop. This contact is generally through writers and activists such as Blaze, Miguel, and, in part, through my own involvement. Once again, this contact need not be a substantive one, need not involve people reading academic work, although certain texts have circulated (Toop 1984/91, for example); the knowledge that such work exists at all, and that someone like me was studying their activities (their Culture) evidences the tangibility of that Culture as culture. Second, I want to note what I might tentatively call the 'trickle-down' effect of two decades of youth sub-culture analysis: the legacy of Hebdige in particular is manifest in television documentaries, in the press treatment of youth culture and in day to day discourses of popular culture. Indeed, 'sub-culture', by the mid-1990s, is such a commonplace term, has become such an established analytical orthodoxy that I want to argue for a kind of pervasive discursive incitement to subculture, an assumption that what (particular fractions of that demographic called) youth does is to form itself into subcultures. It is of no little significance, I suggest, that Hip Hop calls itself a Culture, understanding itself as a positive thing in its own ontological right, rather than as a sub-category of a cultural totality.

B The Hip Hop Mediascape

1. The International Hip Hop Press.

2. The International Hip Hop recording industry.
Here, I would want to consider, for example, rap lyrics and record covers, CD inserts etc, as oral history. These constitute key sources of information, and of the circulation of the narrative of the origins of Hip Hop (dealt with above). Additionally, local recording, writing, listening and embodied practices were all informed by this flow of material from Europe and America, circulating (and, it should be noted, constrained from circulation, thereby constituting, within a logic of scarcity, sub-cultural capital) within the scene. This flow of discursive, sonic and pictorial material was disseminated through specialist radio programs (such as Miguel’s—see p163ff), through specialist record shops (in central Sydney, Central Station (records), Phat Wax and later, The Lounge Room; in the suburbs, sympathetic retailers would follow up import requests from the burgeoning market), and a trickle of private imports (shopping lists given to parents and friends travelling to America, for example).

3. The local Hip Hop recording industry.

A locally released recording constituted a major contribution to the local mediascape. The materiality of a CD, and to a lesser extent, of a cassette or vinyl record, the packaging and inserts, lend an authority to not only the producers, performers and writers of the recorded, written and pictorial material, but also to the narratives and accounts produced, bestowing a kind of artefactual gravitas upon the various representations. The albums become source material not only for the scholar, but within the scene itself, for the education of newcomers, and the preservation of narratives of origin and (communal) purpose.

4. Local media produced by those involved with the Hip Hop scene, including

a) The self-styled ‘underground’ Hip Hop magazines: Vapors, Hype and others;

b) Miguel d’Souza’s weekly column in a large circulation, free, ‘street’ magazine/newspaper;
c) Various specialist Hip Hop radio broadcasts, including Miguel’s weekly and Blaze’s fortnightly shows;

d) Sound Unlimited’s publication, offering an account of the ‘origins of Sydney Hip Hop’ (with which I have already dealt, above).

I want to turn to each of these features of the Sydney Hip Hop mediascape in more detail. Some I will barely glance at; others, I will examine in exhaustive detail. While my concern is not to posit a hierarchical typology of the various media informing the Hip Hop scene, nor do I want to suggest that all these various texts are somehow equivalent, that they constitute an undifferentiated mass of discourse, a melange of imagery which is either playfully and promiscuously appropriated, or which swamps the undiscerning, overloaded ‘victim’, subjecting them (and constituting them as particular subjects) to a numbing, disorienting surfeit of information.

Rather, this is a mapping out of the media terrain through which the agents I have been involved with constitute their identities, their collective identities, their assumptions about what identity, whether individual or collective, should entail. I am interested in the map that these young people have made for themselves through this terrain; in looking at the content and form of the local publications, for instance, we can discern what assumptions are made, what conventions of analysis, representation, reportage, knowledge, are unquestioned, and which are deemed to be worthy of challenge. In turn, this will enable me to consider the constitution of the Hip Hop Ideoscape, and, most importantly, in what ways this Hip Hop Ideoscape is understood by its ‘adherents’ to be fundamentally different to, other than, the Ideoscape of the (putative) mainstream.
A. The Mediascape 'at large'

1. The Mass Media

a) The mass media as repertoire of images.

I will limit my comments here to a consideration of the use of imagery and discourse from various television and movie sources both in rap lyrics, and in the *habitus* of at least one rapper, who has taken his name and rapping persona, from a particular television series.

Def Wish Cast's *Knights of the Underground Table*, as its title suggests, uses the Arthurian legend as an extended trope, a metaphor mixed with the popular construction of Australia as the (geographical) 'down-under'. The album's cover illustration shows the four members of the crew, photographed from ground level, framed by a sandstone arch (signifying 'old', possibly even 'ancient'). All four are scowling, striking tough b-boy poses, legs apart, wearing beanies, shell-tops and runners. They bear a selection of weaponry; shields, swords, a battleaxe, borrowed, I read inside, from the "Nepean Ancient and Medieval Re-enactment Society". The Arthurian 'text' which is drawn upon throughout the album's lyrical, sonic and visual imagery is not, however, the literary imagery drawn from, perhaps, *The Sword in the Stone*, but that of the 1983 Hollywood movie *Excalibur*. One rap in particular is explicitly gleaned from the screenplay of the film: a passage in which the sword Excalibur is embedded in a stone by the dying king, caught in an ambush. It is Def Wish's *a capella* rap "X-Crin":

```
Back in the Dark Ages there was a king ambushed,
Holder of the X-Crin,—a golden mic with power to deliver
Fast aggressive lyrics that murder
This king, dying, took the X-Crin—threw it in a stone
In which it was embedded in
For hundreds of years, no one could free it.
Alone, I stumbled upon it, released it from the stone.
Knights gathered around,—no-one saw me do it.
So I put it back. Yeah I knew it!
—Up stepped a half-stepper knight, he shoved me
```
Aside, tried, X-Crin didn’t budge.
People cried out ‘let the boy try’. The noise
Died.—Silence as I took my grip, I prayed.
Some sneered laughed in dismay.
Eyes wide, the golden mic gave way,—pulled it from
The rock, set on my way to unite the land
And be a part of the underground table and the Saga.

(Def Wish 1993)

Def Wish’s ontogenetic narrative doesn’t really need any explication. It parallels exactly the scene in the film. The ‘fit’ of the Arthurian story, the applicability of the Arthurian world of that film to the Hip Hop (self-styled) demi-monde derives from the discourses of battling and duelling that are part of the common Hip Hop Cultural history of practices such as break-dancing and rapping, a combative discourse extended to the ongoing war with authority: the graffiti police. Other tracks on *Knights of the Underground Table* as I have noted about include “Battlegrounds of Sydney”, “Perennial Cross Swords” and the extended “posse” track, “Saga”. Short linking tracks include sampled grabs from the movie *Excalibur*: swelling orchestral scores, signifying of chivalry and honour; the clashing of swords, galloping hoofs. I should note that there is certainly a playfulness at work here: a familiarity with other ‘Arthurian’ films, particularly Monty Python’s *Holy Grail* is apparent. The playfulness is, however, tempered by a seriousness of intent: Ser Reck is simply not kidding when he talks about battling with the Transit police, about his own “perennial” battle with them.

Other film genres are sampled throughout the album. Schlock-horror films such as those of the *Halloween, Friday the Thirteenth*, and *Nightmare on Elm St* cycles. The opening rap on the album is a three part meditation on the relationship of sleep and dreaming with poetic creation: a kind of post- or neo-romanticism in which each of the Cast’s three rappers takes a verse to explicate their own theorisation of the artistic process. For Ser Reck, sleep is a “Dream chamber”, in which he is “my own author”. His girlfriend wakes him, telling him that “ya rappin in ya sleep”, whereupon, in
the morning, he “Rap[s] my lyrics I wrote the night before/ During the night I had my memory on store”. The potential threat that this discourse presents to the Hip Hop discourse of self-expression is resolved in the final line of the rap: “my skull as my barricade”. Wherever these lyrics come from, they are still his. Die C’s verse constitutes the dream as a territory, a realm through which he, identity intact, fully self-aware, travels: “cross a bridge to a warzone . . .” He wakes, “sweating”, confused; “back to reality where I’m lost . . . was that reality?”, to “rewind back what I recorded on my deck”. He reassures himself by feeling that his “bones are still in tact”. Finally, Def Wish deploys a physiological trope: his brain is “infected, diseased with rhyming words”.

When I asked, none of the boyz was familiar with Coleridge, nor Shelley or Blake. The source text here is, in fact, Nightmare on Elm Street, in which teenagers’ dreams and ‘reality’ merge and become indistinguishable: the quoted “to sleep, perchance to dream . . .” that introduces the track is less Shakespeare than schlock-horror.

The album was recorded and mixed in a garage studio in Penrith. The producer, Dave Laing, who also distributed the album through his company Random Records explained to me that most of the samples were taken directly from video tapes borrowed from the local video store: the relatively poor quality of production on the CD is a direct consequence of this. The image, however, of teenage boys in the far western suburbs, consuming ‘mass culture’, navigating their way through it, cutting it and pasting it to produce their own texts, is, to me, a compelling, exciting one.

A final note: in early 1994, Def Wish told me that the next Def Wish Cast album was going to have “an intergalactic theme”, based upon George Lucas’ Star Wars films. For various reasons, the album was not made, although writing was well under way (I never heard any of these galactic raps in subsequent Def Wish Cast performances, either). I asked Def Wish whether there was any particular reason for choosing that theme. “Nah, not really . . . we just thought that it would be cool.” After the success of the first album, it seems, Def Wish Cast had been alerted to the possibilities
of using genres or themes inventively and creatively, without needing to look for specific thematic iconicities or indices.

The Sleeping Monk took his name, his rapping persona, a label for his all-important 'style' and much of his imagery from the 1970s American television series *Kung Fu* frequently (almost continuously) repeated on late night television. He would deliver his own particular brand of 'Shao-Lin funk' from his 'Shao-Lin temple', borrowing the name of the Buddhist sect portrayed in that series. The Monk was, along with several 'b-boys', an aficionado of Hong Kong-made martial arts films, regularly screened in China Town cinemas in central Sydney, a couple of blocks from The Lounge Room. Richard Toop describes a similar enthusiasm in New York break-dancing circles in the late 1970s (1991: 128-9). In one rap, The Monk describes his rhymes as being "more confusing than an episode of *X-Files*" another American series made and screened in the mid 1990s. In another, he has "got my platoon like Wilhelm Dafoe . . .", a reference to the Oliver Stone Vietnam film of 1989.

In the above examples, then, the mass media becomes a resource, a range of images and discourses from which social agents operating in the field of Hip Hop draw in constructing their own discourse.

**b) Hip Hop-Specific Mass Media**

A sub-set of mass-media images, including 'social-realist' films and documentaries pertained directly to Hip Hop and to African American urban culture. Video copies of a couple of documentaries that screened during the period of my research were keenly watched and discussed. These included "Melvyn Bragg's Southbank Show: Lenny Henry Hunts the Funk"6, screened in October, 1992, the 1986 B.B.C. series "The Story of English", one episode of which was titled "Black on White", and which screened in 1994.

Key films were avidly watched, studied, consumed, digested (and I use the metaphors of incorporation advisedly), often repeatedly.
These ranged from the documentary and cinéma verité style records of the New York Hip Hop scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Wild Style [1982], Style Wars [1983]; see Fernando 1994: 18), through the Hollywood take on the new dance styles (Flashdance [1983], Breakdance [1984] and Beat Street [1984] see Toop 1991: 134), Dennis Hopper’s rap-sound-tracked Colors [1988], to the John Singleton and Spike Lee features of the late 1980s and early 1990s; films which provided kinetic elaboration of the rapped and written accounts of ‘hoods’ and ‘the streets’. The early breaking movies provided, as I suggested above, ‘ideological’ constructs about ‘Hip Hop Culture’ and kinetic material; Recall Blaze with the aid of a home V.C.R. (technoscape and mediascape conflate) freeze-framing breaking moves, and practicing them at home.

The later Lee/Singleton movies provided contextual material: images of streets, neighbourhoods, more embodiments, more habituses. Sometimes these films produced jarring disjunctions: surprise was regularly expressed, for example, at the ‘suburban’ feel of the Los Angeles streetscapes of Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood (1991) and the Hughes Brothers’ Menace II Society (1994); the imaginary Los Angeles, gleaned from the gangsta raps of N.W.A., Ice T and other L.A. crews appeared to take the form of the dense, tenement-style brown tones and projects, familiar from media representations of New York. “When I got there [Los Angeles],” one writer told me after a trip to California, “it was just like the western suburbs [of Sydney].”

The visual-kinetic texts with perhaps the most important impact upon the local Hip Hop scene were, of course, video clips. People would collect tape after tape of rap videos, recorded from late night weekend music video shows screened either by the national broadcaster (the A.B.C.) or on free-to-air stations. Music videos were also programmed for the early weekend youth audience, although these basically consisted of ‘Top 40’ type material: only the R&B end of rap, becoming popular by the early-mid 1990s, made the cut.
The significant feature of many rap video clips was, of course, the construction of a street realism. Rose writes of the specific “style and genre conventions” of “rap video” (1994: 9), centred upon “rap’s primary thematic concerns: identity and location” (10). This emphasis on “posses and neighborhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness” (11), the locations that figure, Rose argues, as the “lurid backdrops for street crimes on the [U.S.] nightly news” (scenes that also appeared, when lurid enough, on the Australian nightly news) (11). Rose goes on to problematise this ghetto thematic: ‘ghetto’ becomes a symbolic marker for ‘authenticity’, and therefore a sign which deployed by any crew, regardless of their own ‘location’, wishing to establish their authenticity.

And so, when Sound Unlimited came to produce videos for their own releases, the crew headed off to Sydney’s red-light district, to be shot cruising past strip joints, drunks, prostitutes, the usual freakshow of underclass lowlife (and at the same time, New Zealand’s Lower Hutt Posse were strutting down Auckland’s equivalent, K Road, high-fiving and hanging out). Here is Tom Horton, director of one of these videos:

We had gang scenes where gang members were walking down alleyways, with hoods, real street dudes. Which people don’t think exist in Australia, but they [Sound Unlimited] just made a few calls and we had a hundred hoods hanging out in a corner block in Newtown. It was a fantastic. (Maxwell and Bambrick 1994: 15)

Even the director takes representation for reality, apparently: Sound Unlimited call up their friends to make a (generic) rap video clip, friends who certainly are able to embody (generically) ‘hood’, and the director (mis-?)takes them for ‘hoods, real street dudes’ (see Maxwell and Bambrick 13-15 for my discussion of the various discursive strategies employed by Sound Unlimited to produce this kind of ‘reality’).
c) The Local Media and Hip Hop

i) Reportage

A lot of it's all blown out of proportion with all the media . . . how can they [the public] learn the truth if they get fed lies and with the media always wanting to like how can you say it always want to be on the main view thing the view of bad things you know bring it out like all the bad violence and people straight away are relating it to Hip Hop because they wear a baseball cap

Ser Reck from Def Wish Cast

When I first met Blaze, he established in no uncertain terms his suspicions about my project: "I hate journalists . . . they always want a quick story", and didn't take the time to "get the facts". His problem, he explained, was that journalists would never listen to what he wanted to say, wanting instead to treat him as a symptom, as a passive cipher for generalisations about youth culture, and so on. Never, he felt, did journalists treat him as an intelligent, thinking human being, or actually listen to what he had to say.

Thornton describes at length what she calls "the editorial search for subcultures" (1996: 151); fired by "sociologies of moral panic" (119; Cohen 1980 is the seminal text in this field), youth culture makes for good copy. In Sydney, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the print and electronic tabloid media and the broadsheets alike seemed to work on a biennial cycle; every twenty months or so, feature writers would be sent out to 'investigate' and write frankly terrifying reports of the youth cultures of the mean streets. Powell, in her analysis of the media demonisation of Sydney's Western Suburbs describes this genre of reportage as "slummer journalism": self-styled "social explorers" braving the fringes of society in order to offer up the spectacle of the lower classes for the delectation of a bourgeois readership (1993: 18-35).
Two often conflated themes dominate media accounts of Hip Hop. The first concerned criminality, with particular reference to graffiti and 'gangs'. Reports of graffiti related deaths (Cameron and Crouch 1990; Skelsey 1992; Papadopolous 1992; Uncredited 1992e), vandalism (Harvey 1990; Carthaigh 1992; Cameron 1993) and disruption (Uncredited 1991a; Olsen 1992) were tempered by reassuring reports of the efficacy of police response (Roberts 1992; Uncredited 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1992a, 1992b, 1992f and 1993; Morris 1994). The second theme, generally presented as analytical or 'investigative' journalism, affected a critical view of the 'Americanisation' of local youth culture. Guilliat's 1994 feature piece in the prestigious Saturday feature section of The Sydney Morning Herald particularly rankled with the Lounge Room crews, with whom he had spent a few days, in that they claimed he had completely misrepresented what Hip Hop was (see Maxwell 1994a). In a similar vein, a series of articles and editorials lamented the increasing popularity of American sports heroes; Jon Casimir (1994) noted that "For the Jordan Generation, Footy Doesn't Make the Grade", while over the summer of 1993-4, the editor of The Sydney Morning Herald regretted that cricket, the 'national sport' was in danger of becoming "just another sport", and a sports writer suggested that American basketballers enjoyed a higher local profile than test cricketers (Derriman 1994).

Both these strands of journalism characteristically presented apocalyptic visions of Sydney sinking towards a future state of terror, characteristically emblematised by images of contemporary Los Angeles (Uncredited 1992d). A series of pieces in the Sydney Daily Telegraph Mirror in November 1994 were based upon a report on youth gangs, commissioned by the New South Wales Police. Prepared by a company named Pulse Consultants, and subsequently leaked to the press, the report itself played down the significance of the alleged gangs, suggesting that there was no reason to believe that the American urban experience of gangs was being reproduced in Sydney's suburbs (see Godbee 1994). Among the consultant's conclusions was a warning that one of the surest ways to precipitate a "gang problem" would be to allow the
media to “beat up” the story. The Telegraph Mirror ran a front page article entitled “City Street Gangs Crisis” (McDougall 1994: 1). Two pages into the paper, a double page spread headed ‘Special Investigation’ was accompanied by a list of alleged gangs, more than half of which were annotated “not active”, or “degree of activity unknown”, framed by a graphic consisting of knuckle dusters and flick knifes.

Deeper in the newspaper, near the editorial and comment pages, is another piece, illustrated by a photograph of a gang. The caption reads

Sydney’s swelling street gangs are reminiscent of those depicted in the film Colors, in which the 21st Street Gang (above) roamed LA, terrorising anyone and anything in their path.’ (McDougall 1994: 11)

This caption alone offers several levels of ‘reification’ (Keil 1994: 227). First, “Sydney’s swelling street gangs” are presented as fact, the tumescent imagery of the seductively alliterated process verb (“swelling”) removing from this statement (that is, that Sydney street gangs are) any possibility of questionability. Second, “reminiscence” ties this ‘real’ phenomenon to a ‘real’ movie. Third, the use of the process “depiction” positions the reader within an economy of representation by which the fictional world of the movie is predicated to, and actually retrieving, a reality that precedes it. The final clause closes the circuit, ambiguously referencing both the filmic, ‘fictional’ gang, and the real LA gangs which that gang ‘depicts’. Fiction (the movie gang) and ‘reality’ (“Sydney’s swelling street gangs”) become entwined in a seductively logical inevitability: there are gangs in Sydney; they will remind you of those you saw in Colors; that film (accurately) depicted/reproduced/represented what happens in LA: viz, “terrorising anyone and anything in their path”. A virtually identical article, also subtitled “special investigation” appeared in The Sunday Telegraph in 1990, describing graffiti gangs “copied from the cult ... made famous by the film Colors” (McEvoy 1990) describing the members of these “color gangs” as being “devoted to
American rap music". Rap music, in such analyses, is read as being simultaneously symptomatic of, and causative of these processes of cultural contamination9.


The electronic media, too, offered tabloid journalism aplenty, with current affairs programmes presenting alarmist images of allegedly burgeoning street crime. When presented with statistical evidence to the contrary, such reports were still able to point towards to what was claimed to be a growing 'perception' of terror, of a 'lack of safety' (see Castleman 1982: 176-7), perceptions fuelled by the credulous interviews conducted with visiting rappers on prime time television (see Maxwell and Bambrick 1994: 3).

ii) Advertising and television

As noted, throughout the early 1990s, the local media dealt with rap music as an increasingly 'legitimate' genre, with broadsheet newspapers reviewing local performances by visiting international rap 'artists', performances often previewed with contextualising 'colour' articles and interviews. The record review section of The Sydney Morning Herald included 'Hip Hop' as a genre, alongside 'classical', 'pop', 'jazz', 'world music' and 'country', complete with a funky little boom-box graphic.

Television drama also produces images of rap music, in particular, which are most frequently held to "misrepresent" Hip Hop Culture
to the insiders, interestingly providing material against which Hip Hop insiders are able to define themselves. An episode of a locally produced series about the working through of racial tensions and teenage angst in a ‘typical’, multicultural secondary school, *Heartbreak High*, concerned a female character, a newcomer and outsider to the core cast, who raps. An opening shot shows her, accompanied by a beat box, rhyming attitude-drenched verses in an American accent, about the various injustices to which high school kids are subject. Chorusing “the school is on fi-er”, to an appreciative crowd of students, who punch the air and shout their approval, the rapper is silenced by an approaching teacher, striding across the playground to disperse this potentially . . . (dangerous? un-Australian? inauthentic?) gathering. Sullen faced, muttering, the kids disperse in a sea of baseball caps and high-fives, and there always seems to be either a Vietnamese or an islander face in shot immediately behind the protagonists. ‘Rap’ is immediately constructed as being subversive, counter-hegemonic, dangerous, and somehow intuitively appealing to the young, susceptible audience. Urgent staff meetings are convened; conservative teachers warn against the insidious power of rap to twist young minds, while younger, more liberal staff members defend the right of the girl in question to express herself. The argument is rendered moot, however, when suddenly graffiti appears all over the school, vandalism increases, and the student body takes on an aggressive, anti-authoritarian mood. In the best tradition of hour-long series dramas, by the end of the episode, ‘sense’ prevails: the Headmaster is revealed to have been an ‘angry young man’ activist in the 1960s, and is adjured to allow this group of students the right to their own ‘rebellion’; here is the narrative of the generational return of rebellious youth. Rap is allowed, and the closing credits roll over a sequence in which the groovy young teachers and hoary old conservatives alike rock their heads to the (substantially mellowed out) flow of the male lead(!), as the female protagonist sings (!) the chorus (“Ho ho, hey hey, it’s Valentines Day”) behind him.
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

This episode (screened in late 1993) rehearses several of the then-current popular discourses about 'rap': its insidious, 'underground' quality; its association with (an idea about) 'American' cultural imperialism, a discourse that could only account for any local (Australian) manifestation of rap as being inauthentic, or at best, derivative; a narrative of ineluctable slide into criminality and so on. Characters sympathetic to the young female rapper couched their defences in terms of the by-now familiar discourses of the right to self-expression ("Express Yourself"), and even that of the appropriateness of youth rebelliousness.

Ser Reck laughed about this episode. He told me that he and the boys had got together to watch it, and couldn’t believe how wack it was. Its “surface” approach bore, he claimed, no relation to the Culture as he understood and practiced it. It affirmed, for them, the failure of the “mainstream” to understand Hip Hop.

Not that such a response should surprise. One can hardly expect someone who has invested so much to a ‘culture’ to concede that a television drama has captured that culture in all its supposed ‘truth’. A lifetime’s commitment, I was told, was deserving of more respect: I have already shown how the idea of ‘paying dues’, of continuity of commitment, and of dedication figures in the construction of Hip Hop. Such ideas demand a degree of reserve, implying a kind of mystery, rites of passage that require sustained practice (as I shall suggest below) and experience as criteria for understanding. It is into this quasi-mystical realm that committed Hip Hoppers have recourse in attempting to explain why representations of rap such as the one in question have no credibility. The important thing about these representations of ‘rap’ in the popular mediascape is that they are interpreted by those aspiring to Hip Hop Culture as misinterpretations: they stand as ‘what we are not’, constituting a negative image which, in practice, obviates against the necessity of positing, let alone defining, a positive image of what we are. The significance of this relationship to media representations cannot be overemphasised, particularly this notion that ‘Hip Hop’ can only be ‘understood’
through an experience of commitment, of practice, and cannot even hope to be represented by anyone who has not had those experiences, who has not *practiced*, and by extension, *demonstrated* their commitment.

Television advertising also created images of something that looked a bit like 'Hip Hop Culture', images once again received with scorn by the insiders. Throughout the mid 1990s, more and more advertisers, from Coca Cola, the Australian National Basketball League to the Roads and Traffic Authority (producing road safety material) used rap music and rapped vocals to sell their products and messages.

Mobilising rap music to market soft drinks to a demographic is the inevitable result of the general extension of rap into the mainstream of popular music. This popularisation of rapping as a mode of vocal delivery created particular problems for those wishing to claim a Hip Hop particularity. I will discuss this later in the section concerned with the notion of 'hardcore', that label constituting a shifting, unfixed aesthetic category, or, perhaps, genre, with which insiders could negotiate musical texts, strategically including or excluding them from the Hip Hop canon. The point here, however, is that the enrolment of Hip Hop to advertising was viewed less than favourably, although the criticism levelled at particular advertisements often circulated less around concerns with the politics of commodification than with the failure of the advertisers involved to engage 'real' rhymers for the jobs.

At the same time that the above episode of *Heartbreak High* went to air, a prominent burger chain screened an advertisement in which a denim-ed boy is seen busking to an appreciative audience, a happy cross-section of middle Australia. Rolling his head, pursing his lips and screwing up his face, his trembling fingers (those vibrato-signifiers of 'heartfeltedness') wring a heart-felt blues from his guitar. All of a sudden, this wholesome enjoyment of the fresh-faced young man ('he’s *cute*" whispers a nine year old to her friend) alone with his guitar, strumming authentically,
is shattered by the arrival of an angry looking teenage boy, baggy-clothed, crop-haired, baseball-capped and bearing a beat-box. The first shot of this interloper is of spastically-splayed feet in oversized boots; his whole embodiment is coded as aberrant, as dysfunctional. Stabbing the play button of his ghetto blaster, this figure starts to execute a series of distorted, pseudo-break moves, shadow-boxing and leering at a pair of elderly ladies to an in-your-face techno beat. He moves jerkily, slack-jawed, overtly hostile. The crowd shrinks away, the soundtrack fills with their sharp intakes of breath and expressions of horror.

Outgunned, out-amplified, his crowd driven away by the interloper, the young hero is all set to pack up, strumming a final electric sssstrkkkk that ends up in a hammily exasperated shrug . . . Whereupon, out of the crowd steps a nice-looking man, who, opening up his own guitar case, straps on his axe, and, flashing a winning smile, with a flourish strums off a catchy acoustic chord. The young boy’s face lights up, and to the sighed approval of the crowd, the pair of them improvise a virtuoso duet, utterly blowing away the b-boy wannabe, who skulks off, no doubt to wreak his sociopathic mischief elsewhere.

But it doesn’t end there. The pay-off comes later, when the young boy and his guitarist friend, walking off after their successful defence of musical probity (“nice doin’ business with you” the older dude offers), encounter the breaker-boy, and, in a gesture of open-hearted reconciliation, extend to him an invitation: differences aside, all three are last seen walking into a McDonalds family restaurant (see Maxwell 1994).
2. Academic writing on Hip Hop

Many ground-breaking ethnographies are providing us with timely and ironic reminders that for the most part human beings live their lives independently of the intellectual schemes dreamed up in academe (Jackson 1996: 4)

One day I told a writer, who was wondering what I was doing hanging around, that I was writing a book about the local graff scene. “Oh,” he responded. “Is it like a subculture thing?” The air was thick with the heady, sweet chemical smell of aerosol paint, metallic rattles and sibilant hissings, the ever-present soundtrack of the spraycan artist. “Cool,” he said. “I’d like to be in book about graff . . . there are heaps of people who’d buy it . . . I tried to find some books about graffiti at Liverpool library,” he told me. “But there weren’t any in the art section. I found them in the culture section.”

Jackson is wise to qualify his assertion that “human beings live their lives independently of the intellectual schemes dreamed up in academe” only “for the most part”. The human beings with whom I had contact in the Sydney Hip Hop Scene were, as a general rule, very well-acquainted with the schemes that we have dreamt up to account for their ways of doing things.

In the final issue of Vapors (Number 8, April/May 1992), Blaze reviewed a couple of Hip Hop-related publications, one of which was Costello and Wallace’s Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present (1990). After a full citation, including ISBN number, suggesting a writerly concern with ‘review as genre’, Blaze, in front of the readers’ eyes, as it were, negotiates Costello and Wallace’s text:

This is not your everyday non-fiction expedition, instead it is a published manuscript written by 2 Harvard educated males [. . .] in a style & format that is totally unfamiliar & somewhat bewildering to this un-colleged reader.
Blaze remarks upon Costello and Wallace's (admittedly at best prolix and often obfuscatory) prose, claiming that

on nearly every 2nd page I had to reach for my 'Superior persons' dictionary to find the meaning of words like: bregma, decoct, ephebes, phylogenie, semioticizing, synecdoche, etc...

He draws a contrast between the language of the observer-scholars and the authentic 'linguistics' of the street:

No slammin, def, dope, hype, krushin street slang in here. This makes it a tad heavy & a mighty involved read, with language that seems somewhat estranged & far removed from the raw urban linguistics of the ghetto, of which the subject matter is derived.

Blaze, however, pushes on in his analysis, expressing his amazement at the extent of the Hip Hop mediascape:

... what totally bugged me out about this piece of literature, was the fact that this essay/critique manifested itself into book form & ended up in an inner city suburb of Sydney.

Blaze then considers the methodological issues implicit in such an academic project:

But more bugged, was the fact that it was written by 2 26 yr old white boys in Boston, Massachusetts [. . .] While both share an enthusiasm for this music called Rap/Hip Hop, they realise in their analysis that their upscale middle class whiteness would give a different overview than that of a young urban black male. So they knowingly take a cautious approach as 'outsiders' in their interpretation of the validity of Raps many attributes, negative and positive. Outsiders, in regards to the fact that although they know the history of the music & have high praise for 'serious rap', they aren't exactly disciples of the Hip Hop Nation.

The next paragraph considers Costello and Wallace's methodology with some bemusement. Blaze describes their analysis as using "an
allegorical format that can throw one of[f] curve many times”, finding their “disection” of a Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince track that samples the theme from the 1960s sit-com *I Dream of Jeannie* (“Girls Ain’t Nuthin’ But Trouble”; see Costello and Wallace 1990: 61-67) to be perhaps stretching a point. He suggests that Costello and Wallace’s attempt to conjure “imaginatively woven storylines” out of what to Blaze is an “innocent and facile use” of source material is “a most peculiar slant on pop culture.”

Remarking that “on the whole the book is full of interesting points more theoretical than factual,” Blaze’s methodological sympathies evidently fall on the side of ethnography:

> Apart from all the brain examinations, they thankfully also manage to deliver some first hand observations. The setting for these anecdotal exploits is not The Bronx, Brooklyn, BedSty or any other N.Y. borough, instead its Roxbury, Boston

Blaze subtly emphasises here the scope of the Hip Hop Nation, adding yet another city to the roll-call of Hip Hop metropoli.

Costello and Wallace’s book, Blaze continues, follows the career of “a local & as yet unsigned female rapper” continues the review. Blaze, finger as ever on the pulse, notes that the album in question “is available now”, thus drawing an immediate link between this clearly alien text and the Hip Hop milieu of his readers.

The book also reaffirms something which Blaze evidently feels to be blindingly obvious: that “rap music on the whole has been given a bum rap”. Blaze offers a direct quote from the text, including his own parenthetical explication:

> “critics & writers so far have done a shitty job of countenancing (approving, encouraging -Ed.) the decade’s most important and influential pop movement”

Clearly, this is good stuff, as far as Blaze is concerned, as he sums up Costello and Wallace’s conclusions.
For their research they plowed through hundreds of essays & reviews from major periodicals in the CD ROM Data Base & discovered that "fewer than a dozen pieces are critical attempts to come to terms with the music itself". The rest associate Rap with rape, crack, gangs & 'lost generations'. An observation that we had already noticed.

The trick here is that, having examined its premises and methodological bases, Blaze has bestowed upon the text a provisional authority, and authority which he now extends, as he finds in the text an affirmation of something that he, the true authority, already knows. Something that the insider, he is suggesting, doesn't need to discover in books, in CD Roms, in scholarly articles.

"The only gripe I had against this exposition," concludes the review,

was their failure to come to grips with the constructive & creative process behind the use of sampling. They constantly refer to it as 'theft' & as a lack of originality. Obviously the whole concept behind it has escaped them. I thinkz they may have mizzed the point mizelf.

And Blaze offers a final piece of (good) advice:

To be fully understood, it [the book] is best read twice. Includes a discography [. . .] No photos.

I have reproduced virtually all the review because it is illuminating both in terms of its content, and in terms of the implications it holds for my own project. It is also interesting to note Blaze's command of the review genre: his listing of the ISBN number, his terse "Includes a discography . . . No photos".

To understand Blaze's positioning of his own authority in the opening section of the review, it must be remembered that Blaze's concern in publishing Vapors was overtly didactic. "It has to be done . . ." he told me, "so that correct information is disseminated to the audience . . .", adding that "there are focal points for
everything in life . . . a home to go to . . .” This concern with ‘place’ will also reappear throughout this analysis, generally in the context of a concern with ‘neighbourhood’, rather interestingly translated from American inner-city contexts to the broad reaches of outer Sydney. Blaze explained the necessity of opening of a specialist Hip Hop music store in terms of establishing a central place for people to meet, to hang out, to network. Significantly, in the months following the opening of The Lounge Room, it quickly became as much an information centre as a retail outlet. Note also Blaze’s use of the imperative form: “it [the dissemination of ‘correct’ information] has to be done”. This construction recurred throughout my experience with those ‘dedicated to the culture’, further reifying an assumed cultural essence capable of motivating activity itself. The individual merely has to ‘commit’, receive knowledge, and in return will receive direction.

Blaze treated me with a fair degree of suspicion during our early meetings. As I have noted, he had nothing but contempt for journalists, whom he felt wanted to deal with only the “sensational aspects of Hip Hop”, ignoring its “cultural aspects”. As I suggested above, Blaze and many others, affirmed by the generic Hip Hop incitement ‘don’t believe the hype’ felt somewhat burnt by media attention Additionally, many writers are simply not interested in having their names in print, lest the police catch up with them— not many were prepared to be quoted directly for this reason. When I attended graffiti workshops with a video camera, I had to take pains to be introduced to all by a respected senior writer, and even then I met occasional no-go areas; Unique one day, for example, let me look through his ‘piecebook’ (graffiti portfolio) on the condition that I did not video or photograph any of it.

Many other academic and quasi-academic texts circulated in the scene. Henry Chalfant’s graffiti photojournals (with Martha Cooper, 1984; and James Prigoff, 1987), and to an extent, Craig Castleman’s Getting Up (1982) were widely read and circulated in Sydney Hip Hop circles. It was a standing joke, related to me by writers and the Graffiti police that these books could not be found in libraries:
that they were *racked* by writers as soon as they were put on shelves. Chalfant’s books in particular offer brief histories of graffiti and its association with ‘Hip Hop Culture’. The latter publication is a worldwide survey of piecing, featuring a couple of pages of photographs of Australian work. The local writers could easily locate their own practice within a global and historical framework, a critical contribution to the sense of belonging to, and being part of a Community, Nation and Culture.

Other, more scholarly books also circulated in the scene. Miguel reviewed and promoted, on his radio show and in his weekly column, a Penguin collection of rap lyrics (Stanley 1992), which included an introductory essay “Rap as American History” (Jefferson, in Stanley 1992), as well as Stanley’s own preface defending the right to free expression in the face of moral majority objections to obscene rap lyrics (see Peterson-Lewis 1991, Gore 1987). The book itself was immediately popular; even the long essays seemed to be consumed with zeal. He also offered brief reviews and recommendations of the works by Fernando (1994) and Jones (1994).

On occasions when rappers or writers visited me in my apartment, my bookshelves would be fallen on. Brian Cross’s 1994 collection of interviews with Los Angelino rappers and Hip Hop identities was an immediate success, as was Toop’s panoplas. Toop’s book enjoyed an enduring popularity in the scene; Jones (1994) and Fernando’s (1994) books were easily digestible, and enthusiastic about Hip Hop to the point of being elaborate fanzines. Both were avidly read and circulated in the scene.

These books not only repeated, once again, in an authoritative manner, the historical narrative of Hip Hop, offering validation of facts, names, dates and so on, but in so doing, confirmed their significance and importance as the objects of academic discourse. My own project was understood within this context, at once affirming the value of Hip Hop Culture, and offering, it was thought, the opportunity of (a limited) fame: Castleman had
mythologised New York writers; why shouldn’t Maxwell do the same for this local cultural vanguard?

J.U. was particularly concerned that I “see the real thing”, after he read one of my published papers (Maxwell and Bambrick 1994) taking me to task for writing about Sound Unlimited, and telling me that “the thing is . . . they’re not Hip Hop”. Def Wish rewarded me with his approval after hearing me speak about his scene on radio: “you know as much about Hip Hop as Blaze”, he told me (high praise indeed).

In addition to these exchanges between the ethnographic population and academe, it is also important to understand their being within, or perhaps better, their engagement with a mediascape in which ‘youth subculture’ had assumed reified, ontological significance. ‘Youth sub-culture’ is, in such a mediascape, an horizon of analysis and therefore, of possibility of being. It is, as once, a constraint which subjects persons to particular assumptions about and ways of being, and produces persons as subjects: hence the pervasive understanding, current both in the Hip Hop scene and in general discourse, that subcultures gives, frees people into, or allows them their ‘identity’, their voice, allows them to ‘express themselves’. Everyone, it would seem, belongs to some sub-culture; they chose it, or it chooses them (the direction of flow of this process is determined by the analyst’s own agenda), and if they don’t, they are ‘a loner’.

A documentary screened on the A.B.C. in 1994, for example, dealt with three separate “youth sub-cultures” (including Hip Hop), suggesting explicitly that this is simply what youth does; that youth is tribal, that being a teenager is about selecting one’s subculture. And as I write, in August 1996, a double page spread (with a front page lead article) in The Sydney Morning Herald addresses “Generation S”; a post-Simpsons take on Coupland’s 1991 Generation X (the periodising logic rolls relentlessly onwards, demanding ever new epithets). The Herald journalists suggest that “it seems that there is no such thing as the typical backyard-and-beach Australian teenager any more”, and that “teenagers have
always been attracted to tribes as a way of expressing identity" (Gripper and Hornery 1996: 10). This is what I call the 'Ted Polhemus analysis': see in his 1994 *Streetstyle* sections titled "the supermarket of style", "the gathering of the tribes", and his "flow chart" of youth subcultures (128-137). These kinds of analysis largely originated from, and were certainly popularised by, the Hall/Hebdige/Wallis nexus of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, becoming grist for journalistic mills: user-friendly, powerful, analytical tools. Emptied of the too-difficult marxian theorising, this model of being/doing/performing youth has been reified to the point that Polhemus is able to suggest, in his eminently readable, illustrated text that subcultures are, simply, tribes, and that "the tribal imperative will always be a part of human nature" (1994: 14).

There is a clear 'trickle-down' (to use a somewhat politically and spatially loaded metaphor) from academic takes on 'sub-culture' to 'the street'. Miguel was an important nexus, an 'organic intellectual' as the gramscians would have it, through which this material was disseminated. Significantly, Blaze *et al*, as I have suggested, take pains to distance themselves from what they understand as the "faddishness" of youth styles, dismissing half-steppers, or weekend warriors, extending respect only to other "cultures". And this is critical: Hip Hop was not understood as a sub-culture, but as (the one true?) Culture, with a capital C.

Blaze's negotiation of Costello and Wallace's difficult text, his effort to locate and translate it for his readership in effect returns the gaze of the cultural theorist. Indeed, the figure of Blaze seems to be looking over my shoulder now as I write, as it has throughout my period of research. The review of Costello and Wallace's book in particular reminds me, in a very tangible way, that the field that I have looked at is in no way a 'pure' object of research, and that Blaze, and J.U., and Def Wish, and Unique, and The Monk, and any number of people that I have spoken to in this scene are alert to my project.
B. The ‘Hip Hop Mediascape’

1. The International Hip Hop Press

There are two major international, high production value, glossy magazines concerned with Hip Hop. *The Source*, subtitled “the Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture and Politics”, is published monthly from New York, and reaches local (Australian) newsstands and record shops a couple of weeks later. I am not concerned with offering a description of this magazine, nor of the London-based *Hip Hop Connection*, other than to note that they contain reviews, interview, letters, feature articles often concerned with political issues and Hip Hop history, fashion and music advertising, and editorial writing that emphatically reinforces the understanding of Hip Hop as Culture, Community and Nation. Both magazines are read widely by the local Hip Hop Community, enjoying a high ‘pass-along’ rate. I often saw both publications being read, or at least skimmed through, collectively; a reading practice through which ‘meaning’ and ‘values’ are negotiated and consenses arrived at. An advertisement for a new album release, for example, might provoke a discussion about the rapper’s past releases, their skills, an assessment of their styling, and so on. The importance of this collective reading practice, and its impact on determining consensual interpretations cannot be overstressed. The Lounge Room, for example, still keeps back-copies for browsing, and many people have collection totalling dozens of issues.

These publications became important sources of ‘sub-cultural capital’ (Thornton 1996, after Bourdieu 1984); the latest news, the latest gossip (which rappers were in gaol, who was producing whom, and so on), critical argot and street slang. Sub-cultural capital accrues in terms of a logic of scarcity: getting hold of the most recent edition of *The Source* early in itself marked one as an authority of sorts (at least for a while); a subscription was highly desirable. Advertisements provided important information about the most recent fashions, and, even more importantly, how to
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Maxwell

wear them: how to embody the 'attitude' of Hip Hop (or, once again, at least the latest version of it).

I do not want to dwell upon the content of these publications in any detail, other than to stress the ubiquity of each, and their major role in the dissemination of Hip Hop history and current trends. The reviewing and writing styles, particularly those of *The Source* inform those of the local (Australian) publications, to which I will turn below.

2. The International Hip Hop recording industry.

Hip Hop releases from North America became available through specialist and import record shops in the early 1980s, generally in response to a demand created by 'alternative' radio broadcasts on radio stations such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's 'youth network', 2 JJJ. Key record shops are often remembered as the place where crews first coalesced, and began to hang out, as private listening habits found kindred spirits, riffling through the import shelves, gleaning narratives and glossaries from the cover notes of Rock Steady Crew and Run DMC albums.14

Sales increased and North American acts toured to Australia throughout the period from 1984 to 1996 (Run DMC in the mid 1980s, Public Enemy towards the end of the decade and again in the early 1990s, before the onslaught of acts throughout the mid 1990s—Ice Cube, Shaq, Naughty by Nature, Cypress Hill, The Beastie Boys, Coolio, Arrested Development and so on). Each of these tours and album releases was accompanied by a rash of publicity and interviews. Crews such as Sound Unlimited were able to meet, do support gigs for and spend time in the studio with Public Enemy and Run DMC, accruing to that group a certain status and access to sub-cultural capital, as well as the opportunity to learn and develop certain performance and recording skills (leading directly to a contract with Public Enemy's recording company).
The accounts of the ‘origins’ of Hip Hop gleaned from these sources, and the recognition of the generic articulation of these origins both in the recordings and on the packaging surrounding the recordings are of commensurate importance: these materials were at once sources of information, and models for the production of local accounts. These recordings, collected as fetishised vinyl in hundreds of bedrooms, re-recorded onto compilation cassettes of favourite tracks, to be played at parties, on a car tape deck, in a walkman. The raps of LL Cool J, Public Enemy, Ice T, even the old school raps of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, constitute the oral history of the putative Hip Hop Culture; a post-industrial, mass-mediated, but nonetheless, profoundly pre-(or perhaps counter)-literate mode of pedagogy.

In addition to, and often, prior to this level of historico-oral pedagogy, local rappers and DJs learnt and honed their ‘skills’ listening to these records. ‘Skills’ and ‘listening’ are here, importantly, modes of embodiment: to listen is, in this milieu, to move; skills are techniques, practices, performances. Without the cultural context of street parties, or the ‘street’ milieu of inner-urban America, with its historical emphasis on oral exchange (see, for example, Abrahams 1970, 1976, 1992; Abrahams and Szwed 1983; Gates 1988; Leary 1990), the site of the learning of these embodiments in the local, Australian context, was the suburban family home, and specifically in the privacy of a bedroom (Thornton 1996: 14-25). Surrounded by images of (black) men, with a set of headphones, or perhaps a cranked up CD player and speakers shaking the walls of the bedroom (you can hear now the parents pounding the door: “keep it down!” they’re shouting), the proto-rapper would rap along (I’ve done this myself), learning how to control their breathing, how to stretch their oral apparatus around the sounds and syllables (try it: harder than you expect) and how to move. Thornton writes of youth “carv[ing] out virtual, and claiming actual space . . . by filling it with their music” (1996: 19, italics in original), but it is more than just this: the bedroom is a rehearsal space, in which the strange new embodiments could be
tried out, where the young fan might (perhaps with the help of a blunt or two), experiment, move, embody; they laugh about using hairbrushes as microphones, about copying gestures and movements, striking poses. And as I will suggest below, it is this embodiment, long after the work of embodying itself has been forgotten, that ‘feels’, simply real.

A DJ, too, would collect vinyl, spend hour after hour cutting, scratching, moving, flexing their skills, all metaphors of embodied practice. DJs talk of ‘manual’ or ‘turntable dexterity’; the flipping, slicing, flicking motions of the DJ are echoed in the movements of the rappers, flexing (the same word is used in this context) their verbal skills, their “syllable ballistics”.

And when the crews come together to write, to party, to break, the same tunes pervade their bodies, setting up a shared habitus. And when a favourite rap is played, a dozen voices will rap along, bodies ducking and weaving, trying out moves, mirroring each other, informing each other as the mimetic moment, structured around these musical texts from another place, another time, another set of experiences, is superseded, or develops into, a local, embodied practice.

3. Local Hip Hop Recordings

And of course, the model of the rap as oral history (or as urban reportage) generated local counterparts. Local raps can be understood both as texts in which various materials from the mediascape comes into dialogic play with each other, and as constituting a key features of the mediascape itself. A producer, for example, might sample particular sounds or dialogue from a rented video or a B-grade horror movie, a rhythm track from a favourite old school record, and a rap drawing stylistically upon the latest West Coast freestyles, with lyrics referencing whatever television series is currently enjoying ‘cult’ status within the scene. And then this recording will then pass into circulation, assume
status as a ‘style’, perhaps a genre, thereby figuring subsequent releases, and perhaps privileging a certain account of the scene, and elevating certain figures (from the scene) who might be referred to in the raps themselves or receiving ‘shout-outs’ or ‘props’ in the liner notes.

Among a clutch of recordings, two local releases stood out during my period of research: Sound Unlimited’s *A Postcard From the Edge of the Underside* (1992) and Def Wish Cast’s *Knights From the Underground Table* (1993)\(^\text{16}\). Sound Unlimited’s 1992 CD/album, *A Postcard From the Edge of the Underside* was hailed as a breakthrough (not least by that crew’s own publicity): the first signing to a major label of a local Hip Hop act (see Maxwell and Bambrick, 1994). Slickly engineered, aggressively marketed and distributed, the Sound Unlimited album contrasts with the low-tech, hand-made self-distributed Def Wish Cast product. Both crews, from Sydney’s western suburbs (see below), take pains to assert their ‘authenticity’, both in their lyrics and in their discourses about themselves. In terms of their lyrics, I want to read an example from each album, in which the crews narrate their engagement with the developing Hip Hop scene, locating themselves within that development. These verses constitute a kind of oral history, contributing to (an often contested)\(^\text{17}\) folkloric, historical microknowledge of that scene. In both cases, the raps are printed verbatim on the sleeve inserts, from which I take my quotes.

#### a) Sound Unlimited

Sound Unlimited’s track “Tales From the West Side”, for example, is basically a claim that ‘we were there at the beginning’; three raps delivered in the distinctively ‘Americanised’ voices of the MCs Rosano and Kode Blue:

> Let me tell ya now about the West Side  
> I’m talkin about comin up on the West Side of the eastcoast  
> No need to brag or boast  
> As some feel the need to state in every second sucker song  
> West Side was a force so strong . . .
Hardcore no longer for the mindless
Set out the lyrics with meaning and define this history
You see some neglected but cannot cover the truth
No matter how protected West Side was in 87 on the record
But further back in '83 who rocked the party?¹⁷

Little explication or comment is needed here. A quasi-mythologising refrain follows; “These are the tales the tales of the West Side”, delivered in a deep, rumbling sampled voice, to which an antiphonal chant responds; “Go West Side go West Side”. As to who ‘rocked the party’, way back in ‘83 ... well, after the chorus, across the breakbeat, crew members Kode Blue and Rosano, not rapping, but in ‘street’ voice, enjoy this exchange:

Rosano:  Yo Blue remember back in the dayz we had a supreme style man we were out there . . .
Kode Blue: Yeah West Side Posse [as Sound Unlimited were initially named] was definitely the crew . . .
Rosano: That was it, man . . .

The final rapped verse elaborates the history:

Let’s get back
I’ll start at Burwood Park
Hip Hop breakin’ after dark
Many crews would join the fray
Travel from east to west upon the train
Some to break some just to inflict pain
You had to be down you had to use your brain aim
Aim to watch or aim to lose
Aim to perform or aim to bruise
Some had no choice
Some could choose
Me I was a breaker in the UBT [United Break Team] crew
Those that were there you know who you are
A tale from the West Side from one who remembers

Elsewhere on the album, the familiar themes appear: calls to unity, appeals to “knowledge”, accrued through having “paid the dues back in the days”. The historiographical theme of these raps and of the album itself was developed in the publicity material prepared
by the members of the crew and distributed free in pubs, clubs and venues throughout Sydney.

b) Def Wish Cast

Def Wish Cast’s raps emphasise the importance of ‘commitment’, constructing a narrative of a glorious past, fondly remembered and romanticised. Die C raps on “Perennial Cross Swords”: “Many just tried it once, jumping on the bandwagon”, advocating the wearing of “shell top Adidas and Puma Clydes”, items of ‘authentic’ b-boy wear that “will never go out of style”. Reflecting on the heady days since passed, he continues:

We stare at brick walls and parked cars smothered with broken down art
Only flakes of old days remain, where the heart prevailed
Unity eroded and found the Hip Hop scene in Sydney
A part of a battleground
Zonal wars, writers rebelled
Breakin was just a dying craze to the majority, but a minority survive

Before ending on a positive note, echoing the upbeat ‘tomorrow belongs to us’ theme of the rest of the album:

The unstoppable scene that’s growing stronger and flourishing.

Def Wish Cast’s publicity material, distributed by their manager during the period following the release of the album, similarly stresses the right of the members of the crew to claim Hip Hop authenticity, premised upon continuity of involvement in, and by extension, commitment to, the scene. The biographical notes included in the publicity material were written by the four members of the crew themselves. Eponymous rapper Def Wish (age 20) notes his own “dedication to Hip Hop in the last ten years [which] is still proven by his involvement in break-dancing and graffiti writing” (Xiberras 1994); Die C’s “involvement of eight years” included “joining forces with Def Wish four years ago [that is, at age 16], still under the name of Def Wish Posse. They started
a small but very strong following around the west of Sydney” (Xiberras *ibid*). The third rapper, Ser Reck, is four years older than the other two, and also takes care to state his “ten years dedication” to Hip Hop.

All three, then, have been “involved”, “committed to”, “dedicated to” this thing that they call Hip Hop since 1984, when they were between ten and fourteen years old.

I am drawing attention to these self-narrativisations (of both Def Wish Cast and Sound Unlimited) as important moves in the game of accruing (sub-)cultural capital. These stories of origin, of commitment, of authority (‘we were there’) circulate in and around the Hip Hop scene, constituting a narrative orthodoxy into which neophytes are introduced and, to no small extent, inculcated. That such narratives are recorded (in the case of the raps), sold, printed on lyric sheets accords them a quasi-documentary status: it is in this respect that they can be said to constitute a significant part of the local Hip Hop mediascape.

The CD insert cards, in addition to supplying lyric sheets, offer an opportunity to ‘shout out’ to the rest of the Hip Hop Community. The shout-outs, on Def Wish Cast’s album runs over two hundred names. In addition to other crews (Intense Quality, Finger Lickin Good, Mamma Funk, The Noble Savages, Home Brewd, 046, Capital Punishment, The Brethren Inc, Sound Unlimited, Voodoo Flavour, Fonkke Nomads, Urban Poets), writers (Reskew, Frenzy, Atome, Scram, Kade), and

to all the true Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney crews for their support and staying true to the real Hip Hop Culture cause we all know that the breaking writing and rappin wont die, hardcore is something more than just wearing the freshest clothes and owning one hardcore tape and the rest, well you know, its something thats in your blood, you live and breath it, cause blood is thicker than water

Then:

1 2 6
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

I must give a huge shout-out to the west of Sydney for its constant support, cause soon the west will rise. To all the non-believers, doubters and straight-up suckers who didn’t think that 4 youths from out west had the heart and ability to put out this album and rock crowds around Australia, well this ain’t for you. It’s for and from the west.

The triumph of commitment over adversity, of the outsiders (the west), representing. The notes conclude:

If there is anyone we forgot, it’s only because there is so many to remember.

This last sentiment was frequently voiced over the air during Miguel’s weekly Hip Hop broadcast (see pp163ff), as guests ran through their ‘shout-outs’, taking care not to slight anyone by omitting them (or, of course, deliberately doing so).

Sound Unlimited’s album, in addition to individual acknowledgments to parents and families, includes a triple column page, “send[ing] the mighty props to da following . . .” This list extends beyond the ‘community’ to which Def Wish Cast’s shout-outs were explicitly addressed; as well as covering breaking and bombing crews, Blaze and Vapours, rapping outfits such as Def Wish Cast and 046, Sound Unlimited locate themselves within the global Hip Hop genealogy: amidst all the local names we find Afrika Bambaata and Public Enemy (with whom S.U. had recorded and performed in Australia). Further, the shout-outs go to a host of local artists such as Midnight Oil, The Allniters, Dig and Swoop. Sound Unlimited, clearly, were working the ‘big end’ of the music biz: Def Wish Cast, for example, spoke only disparagingly of the ‘pub rock’ scene from which bands like the Oils came; Dig and Swoop are funk-oriented outfits making hay out of the mid 1990s ‘acid jazz’ craze. Dig featured a rapper, whose rhyming efforts were considered risible by ‘true’ hip hoppers.

046’s 1995 album L.I.F.E. was produced and distributed by Dope Runner Records. Dope Runner was set up by Shane Duggan
(D.J.Vame) after his departure from Def Wish Cast, and financed by a number of 'sponsors', including a local (Campbelltown) pharmacy and newsagent, acknowledged in the inset notes. Shout-outs go to the same collection of west Sydney crews, with an appeal to "end the bullshit fights [and] wake up and unite". The familiar formulae are here: "A super huge peace out to the true followers of hip hop, the real people that are never scared to express themselves to the fullest", "picture this if we change the way we think, we could even change the world". The most striking feature of the album notes, however, is a number of memoria to "the Graf artists who died for our culture, Mase, Rasem, Dizmel . . ." Throwing up R.I.P.s or full pieces marking the death of a writer is a long-standing practice amongst graffitists. Here, 046 extend this respect to late family members and another friend "killed outside a Campbelltown nightclub". One track is in fact titled "R.I.P." The rest of the shout-outs are prefaced by thanks offered to "the All Mighty Lord for giving us the strength an power to be the people we are today", echoing the almost de rigeur expressions of (often Islamicist, or, less frequently, post-Baptist) faith found on North American Hip Hop releases from Public Enemy through to Arrested Development. The effect overall is to emphasise the seriousness of the crew's commitments: Hip Hop has martyrs, tragedies, deals with the big questions of faith, and death.

4. The Local Hip Hop Media

a) The Australian Hip Hop Press

"Perennial Cross Swords", on Def Wish Cast's *Knights of the Underground Table*, is a rap detailing the exploits of graffiti writers in the "battlegrounds" of Western Sydney, in which the writers are pitted against the *transits*: that special arm of the law officially known as 'The Graffiti Task Force'.

The rap itself is preceded by a dramatic sonic composition, in which two writers working on a piece (the distinctive rattle and
spray of the aerosol cans is pre-eminent in the sound-scape) are disturbed by a train. They urgently try to finish off the piece as the rumble of carriages drowns out their urgent exchange of instructions ("it's too dark . . . fresh, man . . . I just want to finish it and get out of here"). As if the intrusion of the train isn't enough, just as the noise dies away, one of the writers shouts "fuck, transits, run": the graffiti police have arrived. It is too much for the other writer (it is Ser Reck's voice), who has been pushed too far:

"Stuff this . . . I wanna duel . . . c'mon . . . let's get it on!"

In keeping with the combative discourses of Hip Hop, and in the immediate discursive context of the Arthurian thematics of the album, a metal on metal sword duel follows (sampled from *Excalibur*), complete with orchestral backing and grunts. After fourteen seconds of furious combat, the writer is victorious, and (you can almost see it), breathless and faint, leaning upon his sword, he announces that "it's the end".

The mix returns from this noisy, mythological ur-scene to the sonic purity of the studio present, and Ser Reck offers his analysis of the confrontation:

"We won the battle 'cause we have the underground network that's controlling the world with graff mags such as *Vapors, Bits and Pieces, Zest, Full Effect, Hype,* the original *I.G.T.s* from New York, *Flashbacks, The Bomb, Fat Cap, Tommy T,* word, *On the Run, Sneak Tip, Bomber Mag, True Colours, From Here To . . . , Can Control, Beat Down, Over Kill, Underground Productions;* just a few underground graff mags that keep Hip Hop alive, word.

That trans-national imaginary, The Hip Hop Nation, is here shown to exist as something more than a phantasm: the name-checking of the graff mags affirms its tangibility. The metaphors of networking, of the underground, even the fanciful counter-hegemonies ("Controlling the world") are grounded in the empirical, indisputable fact of the ubiquity of these publications.
Ser Reck’s dedicatory comments segue into a sampled grab from a B-grade science fiction movie:

The day we have long feared is upon us. A small but extremely dangerous band of killer humans have invaded our planet . . .

Engaged dialectically with the mediascape, enjoying, as so many did, the frisson of playing out the role of the outsider, the track is teasingly playing with what we have already seen as the media construction of the graffitist as gang-member, as harbinger of a Los Angelinesque urban dystopia (Davis 1992a, 1992b).

Locally, as Ser Reck’s tribute suggests, there were several fanzine-type publications produced within the Hip Hop scene, the two most significant being *Vapors*, written, published distributed by Blaze in North Sydney from 1988 to 1992, and *Hype*, published by various editors from the Brisbane writing scene from the mid 1980s to the present. Both titles refer to the magazines’ concern with graffiti, ‘vapors’ and ‘hype’ expressive of the corporeal effects of spray paint, a sickly, chemical sweetness that ‘hypes’, a kind of low-grade glue-sniffing high experienced after extended exposure to paint fumes.

I want to quote liberally from a number of issues of both of these publications throughout the section that follows. Lest this be taken as being overly logocentric, too academically concerned with text, perhaps, I want to qualify this approach by, in the first instance, noting the centrality of writing and words to Hip Hop, whether that writing is graffiti writing, the practice of which involves literally writing one’s name on a public surface, or the writing of rap lyrics (“it’s all about the words, man” J.U. told me once), or the production of textual discourse in specialist publications such as *Vapors* and *Hype*. Lyric sheets are pored over; Internet bulletin boards contain hundreds of carefully transcribed raps, downloaded, printed into hard copy, and circulated (“it looks just like poetry, doesn’t it?” reflected one net surfing b-boy after printing me out the lyrics of a new NAS recording); local rap
improvisers talk about their compulsion (addiction is a common trope for both rhyming and graffiti-writing), their constant rhyming: Sleek the Elite talks of spending all day driving around the city (he works as an air-conditioning mechanic) composing "similes"; Def Wish raps "my brain's infected, diseased with rhyming words" ("Rappin in my Sleep" on Def Wish Cast's *Knights of the Underground Table*); other rappers show me school notebooks filled cover to cover with rhyming couplets, with "metaphors" (this term is in common circulation). The scene is characterised by a palpable will to discourse, a veritable logocentrism. This also means that often the fact of the magazines' existence is as important as their content; the magazines themselves function as indices of the vivacity of the scene itself: "Like any nation" writes one contributor the Hip Hop Nation "has history, traditions, fashions, culture, language . . ." (*Vapors* Issue 8: 9). And, I might add, a popular press.

Second, important themes and discourses can be gleaned from a reading of some of these print texts. In the following section, the key Hip Hop discourses of Nationalism, Community, Culture, Truth, Respect, Knowledge, Representation and the various attendant discourses of race, geography, individualism and the right to expression will emerge: discourses which provide a context, lay out the territory across which the practice of Hip Hop is actualised, debated, negotiated and so on. In working through these texts, I am not intending to endow textuality with a necessary ontological precedence, nor to imply that these texts have a determining effect on Hip Hop practice. I am simply using them to lay out key ideas, to mark out the terrain.

Third, I want to reproduce in this academic context some imaginative, passionate, playful writing, allowing the many voices to be seen and read (if not literally heard) as they twist and distort ("signify on", Gates would say) language and typography, the variations in which I have preserved in all quoted passages. Blaze's journalism and review writing in *Vapors* in particular offer a model of the appropriation of stylistic and generic conventions.
from 'mainstream' media, conventions refracted through the specific sensibility and politics of his scene.

Finally, I should note that early in my enquiries into the scene, it was a detailed reading of Vapors in particular that facilitated my own engagement with the Hip Hop scene: it helped me to understand the performances I was seeing, filling in context, explicating assumed knowledges, and so on. In now turning to these publications I am, I suppose, recapitulating my own journey into the scene.

i) Vapors

My own first contact with the local Hip Hop press was through Blaze, with whom I first spoke in November 1992. Blaze sold me a number of back copies of Vapors: Australia's Premiere Hip Hop Magazine, and I spent weeks flicking through page after page of record reviews, editorials, feature articles, photographs and advertisements.

From a photocopied pamphlet, Vapors became a 40 to 50 page black and white magazine, sold for four (Issue 7 carries a warning: "don’t be a victim & pay more than $4.00 for this mag") or five dollars at record shops and through Blaze himself. It was the fact that Illegal Substance had dissed Blaze that seemed to be the thing that most offended or upset J.U. in the lead-up to the battle at 2-SER. And no less a figure in Sydney Hip Hop than Def Wish had echoed the regard with which Blaze was held, in his assessment of the same incident, telling me that Blaze knew "95% of what there [was] to know about Hip Hop", and that whatever he did not know was "not worth knowing". One had to respect him, Def Wish said, for that if for nothing else. Had anyone dissed Blaze to his (Def Wish's) face, he told me, marvelling at J.U.'s restraint, "we would have bashed him".

I want to concentrate on a number of Blaze's written pieces in Vapors. I want to draw particular attention to the metaphorical
systems with which he articulates, and advocates his understanding of Hip Hop. A map emerges, locating Blaze at the interstices of a specific media/ideo-scape, at once appropriating and being constrained in his access to particular modes of discourse, tropes and metaphors; that discourses and metaphors tended to be those of sport, progress and (jingoistic) nationalism dominate need not surprise given the context. Additionally, I want to consider the means by which Blaze recirculates news and editorial material, particularly in reference to the Rodney King bashing, and constitutes from his reading of this mainstream media material (and, as I suggest, from a ‘trickled-down’ reading of sub-culture theory) a theory of hegemonics with which he is able to identify the nature and role of Hip Hop, marking that culture as fundamentally different to the decadent mainstream.

Though not without challenge, as Mick’s diss evidences; nonetheless, Blaze’s contribution to the Hip Hop scene and his commitment were widely recognised. I cannot vouch that the kinds of views Blaze writes here were read, let alone, held, by everyone in the scene. However, the ideas, metaphors and passion with which these are expressed in these excerpts are indicative of those that I encountered in general. Additionally, the very fact that Blaze produced these kinds of discourses operated to confirm Hip Hop as a cultural positivity: in the Hip Hop division of labour, Blaze was recognised as historian/ideologue: his texts are highly significant.

Blaze had spent many of his teenage days on the wrong side of the law, mainly because of his love of graffiti. He was committed, he told me, “body and soul” to Hip Hop. Of Anglo-Finnish descent, to his mother Blaze is Jason Murphy. When I first arranged to meet him, in 1992, he was 24 years old. I had expected . . . well, a baseball cap wearing hood with an attitude, I suppose. Instead, when he knocked on my door (he had offered to come to see me, as he needed to photograph some graffiti in my neighbourhood) I met a rather ‘normal’ looking young man, largish of frame, with a goatee, wearing a t-shirt and oversized shorts. The only
identifiable element of 'rap' attire he wore, or rather, the only article of clothing that he wore that I was able, at that time, to read as 'Hip Hop wear', were a pair of ankle-length sports shoes: Nikes, I think.

Blaze was fairly dispirited: the effort of publishing and distributing *Vapors* was getting him down. He was also reaching his middle twenties, and was worried about his future, and perhaps a little rueful about his decisions in early life. As we negotiated my own project, he mentioned to me that he would have liked to have studied sociology, had he been to University, but thought that it was too late. On the dole for a couple of years, Blaze was aware of the deadening effect that can have. Overall, the impression I got was of someone who felt quite powerless, who felt that they understood how the world worked, and that there was no place for them in that world. He told me that he didn’t think that he would ever be able to get a "real" job, that he had no skills that would ever earn him money.

*Vapors* was largely a labour of Blaze's love of his *culture*: he pretty much wrote, laid out, print and distribute the magazine alone; despite the repeated crediting of "The Vapours Collective"20 A box in issue 5 acknowledging "The Hip Hop Scribes of the Vapors Clique", credits Editorial, Layout & Design, Record Reviews and Articles to Blaze: *Vapors* was pretty much a one man show, with occasional contributors. Blaze's frustration in respect of this emerges sometimes in the pages of the magazine. "A bedroom floor conspiracy," reads one editorial page, "masterminded, & acted upon by BLAZE (producer, editor, layout, etc)" (Issue 6, July/August 1991: 3).

One result of this was that *Vapors* tended, throughout its eight issues from late 1989 to 1992, pursue a consistent editorial line. Hip Hop was Blaze's utopia. *Vapors* is probably best read as Blaze's attempt to, in a sense, ennoble, legitimate, or to give 'meaning' to his decade of commitment to this ideal. I have already had a look at some of Blaze's editorial writing, above; now I want to pursue
some of his material more closely, before moving on to consider his music reviews.

Blaze’s Mass Media Critique

“What is Up?” appeared in the final edition (Number 8, April-May 1992), and was, Blaze explains, “written almost off the top of my head (& it shows) by a pagan, heathen, agnostic come atheist, non god believing human with soul, Blaze”. Over four sections, headed in turn “the angry shit . . . the getting heavier bit . . . the had it up to here shit . . . [and] . . . the afterthought section”, and after calling on his “Hip Hop brothers” to “take heed” in the face of the misinformation perpetrated by “this supposed ‘Hip & yeah, we know what’s happening ‘music industry’”, Blaze works through a number of concerns ranging from the “fuckheads who write for the weekly musical rags”, consigning rap to “the columns of dance music”, to an analysis of the hypocrisy of censoring rap lyrics.

“I have never read anything [about rap in the ‘weekly musical rags’] that hasn’t been condescending, ignorant, malignant, stagnant or Hip Hop illiterate” Blaze writes, then distinguishing “those fatly obscene beats of real Hip Hop grooves” from “dance floor fodder”. Stressing the importance of actually buying the material, a theme that he returns to time and time again (“support Hip Hop . . .”), Blaze claims that “nobody I know” purchases Hip Hop records “for the sole intent of body gyratics”. “It’s all about the words, man” J.U. told me on another occasion. Blaze accuses those who buy, judge or review records for their dance value as “inactive brain carrying mutants” who “just wanna relax & not think about other people’s problems” claiming of rap that “it’s too deep to enjoy”.

For Blaze, this is the product of a pervasive misrepresentation of rap as “just racist, sexist, mindless crap that glamorises criminal behaviour” by the media. His analysis proceeds:

A few rhymes are usually either taken out of context & expanded into an image (for the mass populous) that conjours up a frightening army of mind marauding
teenagers that will subvert the youth of today with an unblinkered knowledged-up brain.

He develops this argument further:

What are they afraid of, people thinking for themselves? Damn! Can't have that shit! I mean, the powers that be would lose control.

The image of the "powers that be" and the discourse of rap as counter-hegemonic media was most prominently developed and circulated by New York rappers Public Enemy. P.E. toured Australia several times, and were perhaps the highest profile, and almost respectable, rap outfit throughout the early 1990s. Blaze pushes his analysis further, developing a theory of false consciousness to account for the popularity of "crap" music, music responsible for "hiding the real life everyday issues under a gloss-encrusted carpet".

Addressing a favourite Hip Hop issue, Blaze ends this article by condemning the hypocrisy of "censorshipping butterheads", whom he labels "the immoral minority". Censorship is the key mechanism by which the powers that be deny us access to the truth. He wonders why the Geto Boys are subjected to censorship while "the works of the Marquis de Sade are praised". "Why", he continues,

...are children allowed to read the subtle racism of Enid Blyton or Capt. E.W. Johns, yet told that Public Enemy is regarded as subversive?

He compares "the reality" of Ice Cube’s lyrics to "the bloodthirsty theatrics of most opera", rhetorically asking whether

the verbal expulsion of expletives [will] be the downfall of modern society.

"No," he concludes, "I don’t think so"

And Blaze’s coup d’analyse comes in the final paragraph of his article:
This may be a bit of a wild notion, but societies problems wouldn't have anything to do with ignorance, greed, selfishness, power, instead of the recordings of individual thoughts, would it now. Be them on film, in book or on audio. I hardly think that Robert Mapplethorpe, Gus Van Sant, George Batille, Ice Cube, will lead us to damnation. No. In all likelihood an ordinary god fearing family man in a conservative suit probably will.

Another editorialising article by Blaze directly confronts the question of the influence upon the local Australian cultural field, of an imaginary 'America'. The issue here is the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police in March 1991 (see Cross 1993). Blaze weaves his own narrative of the events circulating around this episode, drawing upon C.N.N. reportage ("A recent survey from C.N.N. television said that 86% of African-Americans feel that they are treated unfairly in the court system, while only 36% of white Americans say that African-Americans are treated unfairly"), the 'real-life' genre of television verité ("What we see on shows like COPS is the police in action.....with a video camera following their every move. They have to be on their best behaviour then, don't they?"), and making links between the King episode and police violence in Australia (Blaze's reference here being to a then recently broadcast expose screened by the A.B.C.), before moving onto a generalised critique of colonialism and patriarchy. The evidence that Blaze collects to justify his "soured rage" (the title of the article) is presented under the subtitle "A Confirmation of Theory".

Blaze's writing here is a case study of one individual navigating his way through the mediascape. What I am interested in here is, in the first place, the sources that Blaze uses, in the second, the imaginary of global geopolitics he constructs, and with it, his construction of his own location and position within this imaginary, and finally, his reconciliation of this imaginary with his cultural (Hip Hop) project.
Blaze explicitly draws upon C.N.N., A.B.C. documentary television, and 'reality' television to construct his narrative. All three are understood as offering a direct access to 'reality': the C.N.N. broadcast offering hard statistical data with which Blaze develops a thesis about the persecution of African-American minorities. The 'reality' here is, of course, the physical reality of the beating of King. The visual metaphors abound:

The whole world had seen the videotape of the King beating & with their own eyes had formed an opinion that what they had seen was an obvious criminal act . . . Yet still after several days deliberation, 12 jurors failed to see what the rest of planet Earth saw . . . the basic fact what this naked eye saw. KING was getting the shit beatin' out of him

It is the blinding obviousness of the barbarity of this act that directly leads Blaze to posit a conspiracy:

This whole debacle confirms that the American legal system is one huge m/f²² of a joke, that is unfortunately not funny for a lot of minorities.....Then again the whole process started before the jurors gave their stupid verdict (corruption anyone?)

Blaze's uncredited source for the hard information he is disseminating, for his urgent street journalistic style, and for his positioning of his own writing practice in this role of disseminator, is, of course, The Source itself.

I have reproduced Blaze's typography. His use of italicised, bold-face and capitalised text stylistically quotes tabloid journalism: breathlessly urgent, the bold type guiding the reader through the text, marking out key characters, emphasising dramatic moments, unabashedly partisan. From his observations about the specifics of the King jury, Blaze leaps into a political analysis, in a paragraph that needs no glossing:

His right royal wankness president george bush (little capitals for a little man) said that the 'system worked' &
‘all people should have respect for the law’, while later another Republican (read ultra-conservative) wannabee president, pat buchanan, said that the jurors had courage. Courage schmourage. Of course Bush’s answer to the melee in LA was his usual knee jerk reaction of ‘send in the troops’ & ‘restore law & order’. At least Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton realises that prevention is the best cure, by addressing attention to the social, economic & racial difficulties that need to be fixed, instead of Bush’s ‘shoot first, questions later’ approach.

Rhetorically asking how people like Bush stay in power, he concludes that “that is not a hard question to answer”:

Why is it that less than 50% of Americans who are eligible to vote do vote? Why in Hell’s name don’t the other 50% vote, are they so apathetic to their own plight that they will let the actual voters rule their lives. Why don’t they get off their flippin’ butts & move things? Imagine if all the poor, oppressed, downtrodden etc went to the polling booths & voted for the ‘good & trustworthy’ candidates, then maybe things will change. Get into it & get involved!2 3

Blaze rounds off this piece with a fleeting reference to comparable police violence in Australia; specifically, the “DAVID GUNDY affair”, which involved the mistaken point-blank shot-gun shooting of an aboriginal man in a dawn raid on an inner-city house in Sydney, and to the A.B.C.’s controversial documentary “Cop It Sweet” which had recorded and broadcast evidence of a police culture of systematic brutality and abuse directed towards urban aboriginal populations, demonstrating, Blaze concludes, to “the cosy lounge room living mostly ignorant public that our own Police force aren’t exactly heaven sent angels.”

Finally, Blaze offers an extended critique of what he understands as the androcentric colonialism of Western discourse. Blaze offers an account of the United States of America (“the most oppressive, sexist, prejudiced, racist, bigoted, greedy, destructive, etc . . . nation on this Earth”) as the heir to the British Empire’s tradition
of “butchering & colonising of ‘savage native peoples’ land”. Blaze is quite certain: being involved in Hip Hop does not entail a slavish devotion to all things American, notwithstanding the popular media’s attempts to institute such an analysis. Blaze’s post-colonialism is coherent and sophisticated. In the aftermath of the 1990-91 Desert Storm operation, Blaze here speculates about the failure of establishment America to address concerns on their own doorstep:

Send half a million troops to defend an extremely rich country like KUWAIT, but yet they turn away a few thousand refugees from their poor & politically unstable neighbouring HAITI. Hey if HAITIANS were rich with lots of gooey black stuff then maybe things would be different, oh and maybe if they weren’t voodoo worshipping black folk then maybe they would be welcome. But they don’t & they’re not of the pale persuasion. So they get the bozack from the ‘The greatest democratic nation in the world’. Keep another country afloat while your own is sinking. REAL GOOD LOGIC?

“In reality”,

the United States of America, as a whole, doesn’t mean shit to anybody. The Americans, in their over indulging patriotism think that their country is the greatest democratic nation in the world, well we know that is a crock of shit. The good ol’ U.S. of A. is nothing but a sick puppy

Blaze concludes that “the world is made for & by the middle aged white man”, and wraps up with another solicitation for contributions:

DESTROY INEQUALITY NOW. Please send in letters on the subject of racism for the next issue & we will print them. We want to know your views from a Hip Hop perspective. This magazine is your outlet so please feel welcome to write what you feel.
WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU.

The assumption, or positing, of a thing called “a Hip Hop perspective” is striking. It is a central feature of this somewhat intellectual side of the Sydney Hip Hop scene that it posited the possibility of its truth as Hip Hop without predicking that claim on a simple identification of skin colour, of shared blackness. The attribution of authenticity to blackness, a version of Orientalist discourse, is alive and well in Hip Hop in general (Afro-centric Hip Hop Gilroy 1993), and in the local scene (see below, for example, pp235-240). However, Blaze’s own whiteness necessitates the finding of another ground upon which to assert his belongingness to this culture, just as his maleness places him, prima facie, in a relationship of complicity with those whom he identifies as the enemy. Of course, mobilisation of a class discourse can help him out in this respect: although he cannot claim to be ‘working class’, Blaze’s ethnicity places him, for the purposes of establishing a Hip Hop authenticity, ‘on the outer’. Blaze’s desire that Hip Hop can be a place from which to speak, a “point of view” recapitulates the social consciousness discourse of politically aware rap. His flood of discourse attempts to paper over the experiential disjuncture that denies the possibility of a linear, genealogical connection between an Antipodean Hip Hop and an African-American one by predicking a community based upon an affective affinity, rather than upon blood descent.

Reviews

The review pages were a regular feature in Vapors. In Issue 8, Blaze wrote reviews of well over a hundred recordings: around 26,500 words of critical assessment. “Our mission”, he writes, slipping into a magnanimous first-person plural,

is to provide you, the listener, [with] a complete guide to what is released so that you will have a permanent record of what to choose from. We sort the WACK from the DOPE. WARNING. No pop rap/hip-house/ swingbeat reviewed . . . (38)
Blaze used a star rating system, providing the following key:

***** Doper than dope. Buy it.
**** Fat. An essential purchase.
*** Gettin large. Only if cashed.
** A waste. Goin’ downhill fast.
* We don’t review shit this wack.

Eighty four albums were reviewed, in three sections, each alphabetically ordered, spread over some ten A4 pages in single spaced, 10 point type. Artists’ names appeared in bold capitals throughout the reviews, and an attempt had been made to reproduce (black and white photographs/bromides) album covers for each review, a total of 28 illustrations, laid out throughout the various pages, some canted at about 15 degrees to the text, to effect a sophisticated graphic design. Following this main album review section were two pages of 12” single reviews—twenty nine reviews, averaging 90 words, in comparison to the 200 word album reviews.

A third review section, titled “Via the U.K.”, covered eleven albums and eighteen 12” singles over three pages. Once again, the albums received generally longer reviews, averaging 300 words to 80 words for the singles.

The final review section catered for “records that are either reissues of classic 70’s funk or of modern albums that don’t quite fit into the Hip Hop category. The emphasis is on the Groove.” Titled “Jazz Funk/ Rare Groove/ Breakbeats”, this two page layout reviewed 12 albums, each in about 200 words.

Seventeen albums, rating at least four stars were recommended as “essential purchases”. A further 48, rating at least three, were recommended for those who are “cashed [up]”. Assuming an average cost of $AU25 per recording (imported CDs generally cost in excess of $30.00, while EPs on vinyl range down towards $15.00—CDs generally retail around the $27.00-$28.00 mark), the reader was recommended, in the most direct terms, to invest
$425.00 on these albums: if the reader was "cashed", the figure rises to $1625.00.

Four albums received the "doper than dope . . . buy it" five star rating. Blaze's critical appraisals are well worth quoting at length, offering as they do a lucid insight into Hip Hop aesthetics:

... dope cutting & scratching . . . an unmistakable and original vocal quality . . . drop[ping] science with obvious knowledge & lyrical talent . . . real undiluted rap attacks . . . the real deal . . . true to their music . . . no hip-house, no ballads, no new jack-shit, no rubbish, just pure Hip Hop that is enlightening & well, it basically sounds dope . . .

Truth, knowledge, 'real'-ness, purity, individual style are valued positively. Another rave review turns on the notion of self-expression, foregrounding the

... funky, creative, original . . . inventive and individual . . . frenzied scratch inflicted positively puzzled jam against [ ] slow piano clinking . . . dopest flute break . . .

as does this review:

... unique . . . [E]xtremely distinctive & exciting with the microphone skills being the most apparent & dynamic feature . . . earth moving fortress like vocals . . . sentence ending exaggerates . . . This is the shit . . . The production is flipping A . . . I have never heard so much variety in so many songs, damn! . . . the music just never stands still . . . I'm sure that the audio equivalent of a kitchen sink has been thrown in for good measure . . . mind crunching crazily cooking wood-burning . . . human beat boxing over one crunchy shuffling break . . . bizarrely spun nonsense . . .

Clearly this recording was a great favourite. Blaze's enthusiasm erupted into apostrophic "damn!"s, his carefully tuned Hip Hop ear isolating "variety" in a musical form usually condemned for its repetitive nature (over a period of months, my own ear became similarly, if not as sophisticatedly, tuned; I went from having no
Hip Hop aesthetic sensibility in 1992, to by 1995 at least having favourite recordings!). Blaze’s alliterated excitement is palpable, the motile force of the music reproduced in both his assessment (“the music just never stands still”) and in the form of his writing; the relentless layering up of imagery, the headlong rush of his syntax, the onomatopoeic viscerality of the repeated “crunch”. This is clearly someone enjoying their ability to write.

A final example offers as close to a musicological definition of Hip Hop as one could hope to find:

. . . the b-b-b-b-basics . . . A phat beat, a booming bassline, a simple hook & dope lyricists & hey presto, waddya got . . . Raw hard edged Hip Hop . . .

Blaze is at his musicological best here, developing his analysis from the ‘primary musical text’ (Moore) through the discourse of a (Hip Hop) musical purity under threat of dilution. Here, at the heart of Hip Hop we find exactly the same discourse of cultural imperialism, of ‘authentic’ culture under threat, that circulated around the question of rap and Hip Hop in the popular press:

The simplicity of the grooves provides an antithesis to the majority of musically overcrowded Rap . . . The only squabble . . . a few of the drum tracks are too similar . . . fortunately this is overlooked when one hears the powerful double-bass tugging at one’s ectoplasm . . . they say what everyone feels, except they always say it over a true unadulterated musical base which remains unadulterated by current trends . . .

At the other end of the scale, two albums received no rating at all: one appears to have been reviewed as an afterthought, described as “not a Hip Hop album,” but instead “an R & Bish, bluesy keyboard infested lightweight smoky club number”, and therefore receiving no rating. The other review closes with the damning words “I hate to say anything bad about a Hip Hop act that means well, but hey it has to be said.”

Six albums received two stars, and one, possibly through a typo-
graphical error, no rating at all. Those recordings worthy of less than two stars don’t receive a published review, Blaze explaining that “we don’t review shit this wack.”

Blandness, inoffensiveness, lack of social comment, commercialism (the dreaded “cross-over”) and femininity emerge as the demons in the reviews of two star-raters (“A waste. Goin’ downhill fast”). “Happy, tinkly drum machines”, “girly keyboards” and “melodic singing” consign one album to “inoffensive” mediocrity. “Female singing” is doubly distressing, apparently, and a slightly homophobic line is also apparent: “fairy key board melodies” are antithetical to the “r awness” and “hardness” that characterise the favoured recordings. Otherwise, amongst these recordings, Blaze finds

... bland recipes ... rock infested ... productions are boring & very very dull ... simplistic and unadventurous ... cliched and uneventfull [B]oring drum machine ... woven with cliched vocal samples ... 

A recording featuring sexually explicit raps is dismissed with the damning “cliched”. Blaze actually found it quite hard to reconcile his own distaste for sexually explicit lyrics with the pervasive Hip Hop discourses of reportage, of ‘telling it like it is’, of the right to self-expression having moral precedence over concerns of what can be called ‘political correctness’. Here, he deflects his concern into a judgement based upon the album’s lack of originality, its cliched nature, thereby saving himself from having to pass a judgement on the content of the raps. Each issue of Vapors from Number 6 defiantly bore a “parental advisory: explicit lyrics” label, similar to those legally required on CDs and records.

The feminisation of negatively valued musical features is also noteworthy. Amongst the mass of reviews, Blaze reviews only three albums by female rappers. He was not ignoring releases by women; this is roughly commensurate with the proportion of releases over the time period concerned. However, the critical discourse about these rappers is significant.
Yo Yo's *Make Way For the Motherlode*, for example, receives three and two-thirds of a star. She is, in Blaze's opinion

the best female artist to come from the West Coast not just because she has production & assistance from Ice Cube...

This is not the only time that a favourable review of a female rapper is qualified by the citing of a male producer. Queen Latifah's *Nature of a Sista*, for which, Blaze writes, she has "an entourage of [male] producers to give her a wider range of musical styles", "pleasantly assaults" the listener's ears." Overall, Latifah's album is favourably received:

it's not bad for what it is ... [A] bit too many love tracks for the harder listeners ... Three and a half stars

Most female rappers, Blaze writes, citing Latifah, Lyte, Salt'n'Pepa and Antoinette are "watered down or compromised". On the other hand, Yo Yo's

main strength comes in the form of an empowering voice, a quality that makes one sit up & listen

This review and one of Nikki D's *Daddy's Little Girl* are both favourable: in both instances, however, Blaze highlights the rappers' concerns with feminism. Of Yo Yo he writes:

but it's her lyrical direction that is in favour of the female population. Hardhitting strong Hip Hop ... cuts like the straight to the point "Put a lid on it" which tells girls to watch their mattress activities or "Girl don't be no fool" which tells females to watch their men closely & "You can't play with my yo-yo" which reflects a strong minded 'take no shit' persona, are indicative of her feminist-like stance ... A push comes to shove type of a gal.

Nikki D is commended for dealing with

contemporary female issues in an insightful way ... she goes on to attack free and loose women on the
EPITOME OF SCRATCH production "Wasted pussy", adultery... on... "Your man is my man"... phatly pumped... a fuckin' dope 'cut the beat' ending... kick n'tha head... NIKKI rips her bi-sexual lover to pieces. NIKKI is a good strong vocalist.

As long as female rappers are "hard" or "strong", as long as they address a kind of feminist concern that is predicated on claims to such qualities, implicitly coded as masculine, and as long as they are guided by male producers, it seems that their work was considered worthy. If they "sing", "melodically" about "relationships"... well...

By the eighth issue of Vapors, Blaze was feeling the strain of maintaining the projects of both publishing the magazine and maintaining Hip Hop as a culture. Ten years after Malcolm McLaren's video clip for "Buffalo Gals" had set him breaking in the school yard, Blaze was still, as he told me in late 1992, "eating, breathing and sleeping Hip Hop". The difficulty that Blaze experienced in trying to get an issue out every two months mitigated against establishing a subscriber base: the last issue of Vapors, Number 8, the first with a colour front-page and colour photographs, was circulated in April/May 1992. Thereafter, Blaze's energy was directed towards establishing The Lounge Room.

ii) Hype

Hype was a hand-assembled, cut and paste magazine, generally around 36 pages in length, with a colour cover and inserted colour pages. It was for a while distributed nationally through newsagents; from Issue 20, and into its subsequent second volume, Hype was available by subscription and through selected retail and record shops.

Hype, in contrast to the monologic Vapors, was a truly heteroglossic text. The letters, interviews, photographs, articles,
the advertisements and editorials offer a tumble of discourse from a multitude of contributors, and there were often internal debates that circulated between various sections of any given edition: an ongoing 'discussion' about the appropriateness of techno music to graffiti-ing, for example. Where Blaze maintained a clear editorial line, a line in which divisiveness within the 'community' was referred to obliquely, or displaced into commentaries on social problems, in *Hype* the heterogeneity of the scene is manifest on the page: an article calling for tolerance, for example, can be found juxtaposed to an article advocating the beating up of Hip Hop pretenders.

Three main areas emerge from an examination of the editions of *Hype* published during the period of my research. First, the global orientation of the magazine, second, its concentration on graffiti, and third, an ongoing concern with themes of 'unity' and 'divisiveness' within the Hip Hop scene. I want to look at each of these in turn, before turning to the correspondence pages. Often all these themes come together: a letter in issue 20 from SIAMONE, in Queens, New York reads:

> I just want to say your mag is the best out . . . we're all brothers and sisters joined together by the love of Graff . . . (28)

**Global orientation**

Primarily a graffiti magazine, "produced by the writer, for the writer" (Cover, Volume 2, Issue 1), *Hype* was modelled on a number of similar 'zines from across the world, many of which were advertised on its pages in a reciprocating cross-promotion. Advertisements, alongside letters from correspondents in the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States further established a sense of the global Hip Hop Community. Feature articles included interviews with (usually) European graffiti writers, who were often able to name local, Australian writers when asked to list their favourite graff artists. Sydney comes in a creditable fifth on Danish writer Bates' list of the 'Top Ten Aerosol' cities, after New
York, Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Los Angeles, although he does concede that “this was the first [list] that came into my head” (Hype 19, February/March 1993: 5). Nonetheless, Sydney and Australia rates. Bates can even name some Sydney writers: “Merda, Puzler, Atome, Unique, Tame—There are so many out there, some I don’t even know about.” (op cit) Mr Rens, also from Denmark, offers this appraisal of Australian graffiti:

U.S.A. is TOP! Australia is fresh too . . . I heard a lot of stories about what was going on there . . . and still is. Before I saw HYPE I didn’t know shit about graff in Australia. Many good artists there (ibid 12)

Engaging in a bit of cross/self-promotion, the interviewer asked Mr Rens whether he likes “the Hype magazine . . . .”

HYPE is “HYPE!” First magazine I saw with colours! Sure Fresh! (op cit)

Every issue of Hype featured a list of addresses “to write or swap flics”. Potential correspondents hailed from Germany, Spain, the United States, Britain as well as all over Australia. There is a demonstrable global community of writers and it appears to cross international boundaries, substantiating claims to a Hip Hop Nation. I placed my own name in Hype, and received responses from Queensland, South Australia, Spain and Canada, all written in the same handwriting, the identifiable Hip Hop/graff script. Photographic spreads of “European Trains” (“bombin’ is so strong on Dortmund trains at the moment that EVERY train is pieced” (Issue 20: 18). Another layout is accompanied by this text:

Brisbane’s KASINO and Sydney’s ATOME have arrived back from their world tour. First stop New York and then off to Europe. During their travels they pieced with writers such as RENS, BATES, POEM and loads more. Plus several successful wholecars and top to bottoms in Germany (Issue 20: 7).

The possibility of travelling to Europe and America and being able, on arrival, to both collaborate on a graffiti work, and to be
welcomed into strange homes "like a brother" as one writer put it to me, was often cited to me as evidence of the Hip Hop Nation. Accounts of such experiences emphasise the feeling of being brought together by shared styles, shared enjoyment of the experience, mutual 'respect' brought about by the circulation, in magazines such as Hype of photographs, and, of course, the thrill of getting up on the other side of the world.

Emerging from these pages is the sense that the reader is in a real sense, engaged in a global project. The strength, ubiquity and realness of the Hip Hop Nation was reinforced, as was Sydney and Australia's belongingness to it.

**Graff**

Where, in the pages of Vapors, Blaze discouraged writers from sending in drawings—

> Please send photos. NO OUTLINES. It's kinda safe & easy to draw on a piece of paper, isn't it? Piecing takes skill and plenty of practice. Ie: walls, trains, etc . . .

*(Vapors 7, March/April 1991, p18)*

—the editors of Hype solicited both photographs of completed pieces and outlines. Hype devoted most of its page space to graffiti, with a cheeky disclaimer appearing on almost every page of the pictorial layouts:

**NOTE: HYPE MAGAZINE DOES NOT ENCOURAGE THE PAINTING OF TRAINS.** These are reproduced for the interest of our readers only. *(Hype Issue 20 May/June 1993: 18)*

_Hype_ routinely celebrated the petty-criminality of graff. A feature on "Mel-burn (Melbourne)" announced in gleeful tones:

> The [train]lines are thrashed, 90% of pieces from Melbourne we receive are on the lines and illegal

*(Volume 2, Issue 1993: 13).*
On the opposite page, "a collection of old school shots from Sydney and Melbourne (‘84-‘87)" placed the contemporary 'thrash' in an almost art-historical context: a discourse of progress and genre in which graffiti passes through periodicised 'schools'.

Another set of pictures documented a train that was “vandalized top to bottom” by Brisbane crew K.O.C. (Volume 2, Issue 1: 20). Immediately beneath one of the ‘Hype does not encourage . . .' disclaimers in issue 19, the editors urged the reader to “watch out for HYPE’s Metal Monster issue coming out soooooonnnnnnnn . . . . (Hype Issue 19, February/March 1993: 14): an entire special issue, in colour, documenting train after train covered in top-to-bottom pieces. As a guide to circulation numbers, an advertisement for this special issue warned that there will “only be 2000 printed “(Hype Issue 20, May/June 1993: 30).

Linking the local bombing scene to the rest of the world, an article entitled “German train bomber RIO is still on the attack" told of a "bad German guy" calling himself RIO. RIO had written a letter to Hype, enclosing photographs, explaining that “the vandal squad is on our asses very bad. They tap our phones, search our homes and observe us . . ." to which the Hype editors added “. . . Sounds like home” (Volume 2, Issue 1: 24). Affinities were negotiated across the globe, unities effected in the face of an ‘oppression' that is, perhaps, of their own making.

And, finally, another media critique. Editor ‘Broke’ wrote in Issue 20 of a dispute that threatened to take Hype off newsagent shelves, before commercial pressures actually did so:

**Something to Laugh At . . .**
Recently I had to talk live on a South Australian radio show, in order to comfort a City Council and some newsagencys that Hype does not encourage illegal graff. Well I don’t know about that but I know there is magazines available a lot worse than ours. Such as pornography, is this encouraging RAPE? And how about violent sport and gun zines, what do they encourage? Any kid can walk in and pick up a newspaper, HYPE
looks like a Golden Book\textsuperscript{25} compared to these. Stop and
think, is art a crime compared to murder and rape?
Stupid Old FOOLS! Stay Hyped! (Hype Issue 20,
May/June 1993: 31)

A familiar generational rhetoric shores up a somewhat flawed
logic. Nonetheless, there is an argument being presented here
recapitulating ‘freedom of speech’ arguments put to defend the
right of rappers to perform and record misogynous lyrics (see
Morley 1992; Stanley 1992), alongside the notion of ‘graffiti as
art’. And while Broke was quite right, perhaps, to question the
strict logic of arguments that read directly from representation to
practice, he quite clearly enjoys the petty criminality of his ‘art’:
it’s not as bad as rape and murder, but one still detects the
pleasure the writer takes in what he freely calls “illegal graffiti”.

Unity

In Volume 2, Issue 1, Katch wrote of the “differing opinions on
where to hang out or what is cool or fashionable at the current
time”, lamenting the centrifugal forces that appeared to be
threatening the coherence of the scene. Calling for “open minds”,
Katch suggested that if people stop trying to “compete with each
other, then the original essence of Hip-Hop can be discovered” (6).
Significantly, this full page article could not offer much of a clue as
to what that essence might be, other than to say that it “is one of
unity and acceptance not of elitism,” and that although there will
always be “personal differences,” matters of personal choice,

there will always be binding similarities, that lots of
other people will not recognise, whether it’s Aerosoul
Art, Breaking, Hip-Hop or whatever . . . (ibid)

One of the issues that had precipitated this attempt to reconcile
differences had been an extended debate on the pages of Hype
about the relative merits of techno and rap music. In an earlier
issue, Seiz had written “I like to breakdance to techno . . . it’s fast
and energetic . . . is not new . . . this might stun a few people, but
Techno music is similar to Rap music in many ways” (Issue 18: 8). Seiz and Katch both produced genealogical arguments to legitimise techno in the contemporary scene, adducing evidence of ‘old school’ breakers dancing to the high beats per minute electro-funk (see Toop etc) in the early dayz, before techno gained its “bad commercialised reputation”. Wrote Seiz:

it’s not a part of the scene today. But it is. A large number of respected writers are listening to today’s techno, myself for one. It brings back memories . . . (ibid)

Seiz seemed to be wrestling with a contradiction that ought to have brought his sense of cultural being crumbling down around him: ‘it’ (techno/electro) is not a part of the scene, because it is ‘commercialised’, and therefore is not ‘rap’. However, it is part of the scene: he had the empirical evidence of his own practice to prove that. The recourse to a common tradition solves the contradiction in one way: his listening to techno, he argued, is actually more authentic in Hip Hop terms because it harks back to the Old School days. He claimed to have superior knowledge, mobilising his subcultural capital: “this may surprise some readers/ students, but . . . .”, and used his authority within the scene (as a ‘respected writer’ who can remember the old days) to renegotiate cultural meaning.

Katch argued that his own tolerance of a music form which he personally “couldn’t give a fuck for” is demonstrative of the Hip Hop ethos of acceptance, identified before as partly constitutive of “the original essence of Hip-Hop”. He added “I respect breakers for the artform they practice.” This discourse of respect for the artist is central to Hip Hop thinking, and is intrinsically linked to ideas about ‘representation’ and ‘self-expression’

Katch continued his article, suggesting that breaking is still part of the Hip-Hop culture and must keep evolving as it has for the past decade, and if breaking to techno is the next step in the evolution then
good luck and stay strong \((ibid)\).

The 'Culture of Hip Hop' is a simple given. 'Evolution' is change within the ontology of a cultural essence, a cultural essence which will be recoverable whatever happens, rather than itself being subject to the vagaries of evolution.

Not all the writers in this same issue of \textit{Hype} seemed to be quite as accommodating of techno. GNOME One writes:

\begin{quote}
It seems the Techno scene has kicked in with a big boot, and its sucking once devoted Hip Hoppers into becoming freaks (Volume 2, Issue 1: 8)
\end{quote}

Clarifying his position, he continued:

\begin{quote}
Now I'd be a hypocrit to diss Techno, cause I attend raves and also bust rhymes in a Techno outfit . . . and honestly, I don't mind the shit. But no way am I crossing over to the Techno genre and it's sad to see writers selling out to a scene that is so plastic . . . \((ibid)\)
\end{quote}

Techno tended to be associated with crass commercialism, with mind-altering drugs (as opposed to the merely facilitative high of the blunts, I suppose), and therefore was understood as being 'false', "plastic". But to attend raves and to rap with a Techno crew was apparently not the same as "crossing over" to what is (only?) a "genre", a sub-set, not a fully formed 'culture':

\begin{quote}
Remember, Techno is cool, but in no way can it replace the unforgiving culture of Hip Hop \((ibid)\).
\end{quote}

The Hip Hop god, apparently, was a jealous god: once you "crossed over" the generic Rubicon, there was no coming back. GNOME One's article continued its round-up of Hip Hop happenings in the Brisbane scene, warning against "a large number of half-stepping toys turning up . . . Sadly these wannabe's associate themselves with Hip Hop." To 'half-step' was to not be fully committed to the Culture, to be a weekend Hip Hopper. Gnome's solution? "Half-stepping bashers might have to become the flavour of the
month!": beat the wannabes up! He urged his readers to "support Hip Hop!" before signing off with a nasty post-script, directed, I assume, at Sydney crew The Brethren, who had recently visited Brisbane and told me afterwards that they had been refused permission to perform at a Hip Hop night at a club. Gnome writes:

Christian half-stepping P-funk wannabe sellouts weren’t shit back in the day and they still ain’t shit! (ibid).

An uncredited article on the penultimate page of Volume 2, Issue 1 placed the question of techno music within the rubric of representation. An article had been published in Zest! magazine²⁷, apparently claiming that "Brisbane’s Hip Hop Community have sold out to Techno, that nothing has been happening" (op cit 31). The Hype article denied this categorically:

Well, you on the Gold Coast [where Zest! was published] have misrepresented the Brisbane scene. It is dedicated to graff with a constant flow of pieces and bombing (ibid).

To misrepresent was a cardinal sin within Hip Hop, on a par with disrespecting, and capping (disrespect to another writer’s art). The article continued, offering just about the closest to a formulaic definition of Hip Hop Culture available:

There seems to be a never ending complaint about what we all should listen to. If you paint, break, DJ or MC, you are Hip Hop involved and supporting your culture . . . we will always believe piecing is the strongest dedication to Hip Hop, because of the risks involved for something you believe in . . . (ibid)

Once again there is the invocation of the key Hip Hop practices, and the subordination of self to the cultural essence, the sense of self-sacrifice, and commitment to the greater glory that is Hip Hop. And that sense of nostalgia, here couched within a discourse of cultural dilution or contamination: the article was titled, and closed by repeating, “Stop the Rot.”
And, finally, it was not merely the local scene that seemed to have fallen from its originary unity, prey to infighting, as SIAMONE, the correspondent from New York suggested:

The violence and disrespect towards each other must cease. Graff is a world-wide movement, black, white, asian, hispanic or whatever, we're all in it together . . .

(Issue 20: 28)

The Brisbane graffiti scene in particular had a reputation for violence. I spoke at length with two self-styled 'Hip Hop Promoters' from Brisbane, Felicité and Andrew, together calling themselves 360 Sole Massive. They had edited Hype until October/November 1992, Felicité subsequently producing another magazine, Zest! They told me that capping, the deliberate defacement of another writer's tag, throw-up or piece, was rampant in Brisbane, and that fights had broken out, homes been ransacked and people hurt as a result. A conspiracy theory circulating in the scene suggested that the Police were the perpetrators, precipitating violence to facilitate arrests. This divisiveness, whatever the cause, is manifested throughout Hype. Locations of photographed pieces are not revealed, there are recurring exhortations, as we have seen, to unity and a return to shared, originary values.

Letters

The letters page in Hype offers a variety of perspectives (and degrees of literacy). Echoing SIAMONE's sentiments, a writer from Sydney recounted the damage being done to pieces in Sydney: "even the 'Pots' dedication" (a piece marking the death of a young writer) being damaged. He called for an end to "all the bullshit between writers . . . Peace and unity, have respect, be respected" (FLOTERT & DLEMR, T.S.P. [their tags and crew name], ibid), before crediting Hype for its pedagogic function: "you've got everybody in Sydney who's anyone schooled". Another correspondent concurred:

Your mag is so dope, whenever I flick through it, I just get high off the stuff in it. I've just started to piece, and
I'd like to congratulate you guys on helping me by having a sketch page. I learn my style off it (Uncredited, *Hype Issue 19*, February/March 1993: 27).

Another letter explained that the writer has just been released from a detention centre, and has decided to “give up illegal graffiti and just stick to legal graff”. He also took the opportunity to notify readers that he was changing his tag to ‘TAO’, before calling on everybody to “STOP THE POINTLESS VIOLENCE IN HIP HOP . . . we’re meant to be about peace to your brother, writer and art.” Tao’s letter seems to be a heteroglossic return of some of the rhetoric of Nelson George’s 1990 illustrated book, well known in the scene, titled *Stop the Violence*, a text about a project involving several prominent African-American rappers, including Public Enemy, advocating ‘brotherhood’ and an end to gang fighting in urban America.

A poignantly named writer from Perth, Western Australia credited *Hype* with “keeping hip hop alive and kicking” (Loner in *Hype Volume 2, Issue 1*: 25). The next letter on the same page was from Adelaide in South Australia: “The scene here goes off” (Faulter and the Blackwood Boys, *ibid*). Taoist wrote in to inform everyone that he has moved to Coonabarabran (“chillin’ with the country bumpkins”) in rural (‘outback’) New South Wales, and needed penpals to keep in contact with him. From each corner of the country, these words claimed a belonging to the culture, casting out their nets of ‘shout outs’ and ‘respects to’, lists of crew and tag names. In Issue 20, a correspondent admonished writers who have their addresses printed, and to whom he has sent photographs of his own work, anticipating an exchange: “at least have the decency to send something back!” (‘Never,’ Brisbane, Issue 20: 28). This appeal to ‘decency’ reminds me of Unique’s assertion that to respect someone else’s work by not capping it is simply “the common sense thing to do”: the code of conduct informing graffiti practice was founded on values that were held to be self-evident; fundamentally the values of polite, middle class society, revolving around the right to expression, and, of course, proprietary rights over the products of that expression.
From ‘Unsolved Mysteries’ came a letter replying to Broke’s comments on representations of violence and pornography (quoted above):

We are not murderers or rapists, they are the real perpetrators of violence in society, not graffiti writers

and making the familiar call for unity:

If all writers could get down with real hip hop and not violence imagine the results. Could you? (ibid).

This is the discourse of ‘coming up’, the vaguely proselytising dream of a unified Hip Hop sensibility releasing an unrestrained creativity upon the world that doesn’t want to understand.

“The Nameless Language”

Before leaving Hype behind, I want to quote in full my favourite article: a piece which appeared in Issue 19 (February/March 1993, p28), uncredited, centre-justified, and surrounded by a black border in which the words “push style to extremes” were repeated half a dozen times:

on a mission

title: the nameless language

word - read this openminded! - it’s part of the universal truth

about a language createt by indivisually destructively

recreating/transmutating the alphabet to a phenomenon called

‘style’. the communication through the alphabet in daytimelife

failed on every level (state, race, social a.s.o.).our

indivisualanguage is global, colorfull, independent, the

outsideworld couldn’t understand it and gave it the name

‘graffiti’. they named a phenomenon that couldn’t be named for it

has no limits butthe state of mind of the creator. to give it every

kind of name means to give it limits. every wrighter is able to

see the same creative spirit as within himself in every tag,

throw-up and piece (simple or complex). important for us is what

style is sayin’ to us and what we can say through style! the more

we realize the harder it will be to give it a name. let them

outsiders call it graffiti, as soon as they wanna become or became

insiders they will realize that this phenomenon has no
name/limits. we don’t have to be accepted by an ‘art’ trading
gallerywhorehouse world. their oppinion is of no segnificance for
us. our culture stays strong within itself. it’s alive on trains, walls
and canvases. as long as we are consiess of what we are doing, as
long as we don’t fight over biting, who has better style, crossing
or who is up most for we all learned from that, we’re able to see
that we’re not fighting against each other, the cops or society but
within it for more tollerance and understanding between each
other. at that moment we’ll realize that this struggle is
nameless/endless. the important thing is what we do with it not
how we call it. stop wasting your time and energy on dissin,
going over, betraying, realize what can be done with
style/spraycan; expand it, pioneer it, innovate it, bomb it, teach it
and give respect to those who did this before you - peace to the
roots and all styleaddicted junkies worldwide - the fantastic
partner scum! division wild west germany is out?

The piece appears to be a contribution from a writer called Scum,
recapitulating several of the themes I have addressed above: the
salutary calls for unity, the self-sufficiency or completeness of Hip
Hop as a culture, the marking of a boundary between Hip Hop
insiders and outsiders. What draws me to this piece of writing,
however, is the concern with the innominate, innominable centre
of Hip Hop Culture. The construction of the idea of ‘culture’ here is
frankly theological, and I recall Spivak’s introduction to Derrida’s
Of Grammatology:

Heidegger makes it clear that Being cannot be contained
by, is always prior to, indeed transcends signification. It
is therefore a situation where the signified commands,
and is yet free of, all signifiers, a recognizably
theological situation” (Spivak 1976: xvi).

The refusal to speak Hip Hop’s (real?) name is recapitulated in the
rhetoric of transcendence, the almost archetypically mystical
language of the newly converted, and in the discourse of the
universal creative spirit, recognisable in each and every piece,
large or small. I will return to the ‘metaphysics’ of Hip Hop Culture
below.
iii) Other publications

*Zest* was published from the Gold Coast (Queensland) by Felicité Prior, sometimes contributor to *Vapors*, ex-editor of *Hype* and director of 360° Sole Massive, a “Hip Hop publicity company”. *Zest* was a small format (A5 size) black, white and green publication selling for $4. The focus was on music, DJing (particularly advocating the purchasing of vinyl records) and interviews, rather than on graffiti. Each issue included an “update” column from each major Australian city, detailing Hip Hop events, or the lack thereof. *Zest* carried limited advertising from record shops and mail-order spray paint distributors.

*Slingshot* was published in Sydney, and until 1993, was distributed free to sympathetic record shops and clothing retailers on photocopied “100% hemp paper” by Trent Roden. This ‘zine was addressed to skate boarders and to Hip Hop enthusiasts: an interview with Ice Cube was reproduced in part from an upcoming edition of *Slam* skateboard magazine in which Ice endorses/legitimises/authenticates the “connection between skate culture and hip hop music”, reporting that “I have a brother in law who is 14 who doesn’t leave the house without his skateboard” (*Slingshot* no. 3 no date [1993]: 13).

A letter in the same issue, in a section titled “Voices From tha Street”, recapitulated the ‘true hip hopper’ v ‘half-stepper’ debate that we have seen in *Vapors* and *Hype*: Observing the fashionable ubiquity of “fat jeans” (noting that even *Vogue* ran a feature on fat fashion), the purchasing of “the humble and honorable Puma Clydes and Adidas Gazelles” by “anyone with money in their pocket”, and the ‘biting’ of “our vocabulary” by everybody from “newsreaders to taxidrivers”, the letter-writer (calling themselves “The silent partner”) reassuring the reader that “obviously these bandwaggoners will fall off and the true hip hoppers will still be around so there’s not really anything to worry about”.

The discourse of progress, of Hip Hop as culturally developmental, reappears here, in the midst of a reflexive analysis of ‘society’s’
qualms about the scene:

hip hop is angry music (mostly) so as a result hip hoppers are angry people (mostly) therefore society fears us and sees any attempt to seriously gain recognition for ourselves as musicians, artists, dancers or whatever as half cocked.

Recall J.U.'s claim that "we're not angry people" (above, p22). The tension between the discourses of counter-hegemonics and those of 'recognition' are amongst the hardest for Hip Hop advocates to negotiate. Similarly, the tension between the oft-stated proselytising desire to expand, 'come-up', grow and the need to retain a degree of exclusivity necessitated a constant labour of genre-boundary policing, as I have suggested, and as this letter further illustrates.

Using a disconcertingly media-stereotypical metaphor, the letter proceeded:

We got the finger on the trigger but we're only firing blanks. This attitude only makes it harder to achieve any growth let alone an uprising of the Australian hip hop movement.

Once again, the plea for a Hip Hop Community free from violence: "we're past that stage now". Instead, "the creation of unity and friendship" will lead to "the uprising of our culture fired with both barrels." This need not entail, however, forsaking a hardcore attitude:

Look at Bretheren or Def Wish Cast they both hit hard as a motherfucker on stage but off stage they're mellow and genuinely peaceful.

Echoing Blaze's discourse of tolerance, we read

What's the point of dissin or cleanin up someone who's not a bomber or straight up B Boy, that's just a different kind of racism, and aren't we all against that.
What is important is, again, the quality of being true to one's self, and, concomitantly, respecting those who seek merely to (honestly) express themselves:

Why beat down someone who rides a skateboard or a horse even, or listens to thrash music? As long as they keep to them self and are true to the game there shouldn't be a problem . . .

Often I was the beneficiary of this discourse of respect for someone being true to themselves, to their own thing. After hanging around long enough for people to understand that I wasn't a journalist looking for a sensational angle, or attempting to diss the scene, and establishing my self-stated desire to "know what is going on", the perceived 'genuineness' of my project was reciprocally 'respected'.

The letter concluded with the familiar peroratory flourish:

. . . for every true hip hopper . . . there's probably twenty and a half steppers out there just aching to be "In there". Peace to all the real peoples out there bringing on the change and the uplifting of hip hop culture.

The editor had appended a note to this contribution:

More like a short story than a letter, but worth it anyway.

Finally, at the end of my research, another Hip Hop publication appeared, this time in newsagents. Raptanite, published from Cessnock, a coal-mining community some 180 kilometres north of Sydney, promised to "express the words and thoughts of the hip-hop culture", this first issue manifesto/editorial going on to solicit contributions: "As ya flow through the following pages please remember YOU have to make this 'zine work" adding that "RAPTANITE is completely uncut, raw and uncensored".

Amongst the record reviews (guest reviewer DJ Vame), interviews (with north-western Sydney crew Industrial Dispute) and graffiti
photo-spreads, a feature article addressed the question of respect. Promisingly opening with a promise to “define the word hip-hop” the writer conceded that

Although everyone has a different definition, to those who are a part of it hip-hop means a way of life.

The three key practices, writing, breaking and rapping, get a mention as “aspects of this culture”, to which was added “the general attitude”. Again, the discourse of Hip Hop expansionism was activated, here expressed as an almost evolutionary necessity, global in its dimensions:

With this lifestyle becoming ever-present in most societies around the world, everyday people are starting to sit up and acknowledge its characteristics.

Note the echoing of Arrested Development’s massively successful 1993 release “Everyday People” (Arrested Development toured Australia in May 1994). There is also the familiar discourse of revelation: “sit up and notice”, lamenting the misrecognition of the facts about Hip Hop:

Those who don’t know a whole lot about hip-hop discount the music as a ‘faze’ or ‘fad’, when in fact it has been around for almost two decades and still going strong.

The failure of ‘society’ to acknowledge and respect Hip Hop is attributed to “the media”, which dwells upon rap’s alleged promotion of “misogyny, violence and racism”, rather than upon “the positive side of the culture”.

b) Miguel d’Souza

Miguel looms large in my account, as an ‘organic intellectual’ of the Sydney Hip Hop Scene. Our relationship was facilitated by our shared cultural capital, Miguel having recently graduated with a degree in media studies, and he was enthusiastic about my project. Throughout the time of my research, he published a weekly
column in a free newspaper, 3-D World, distributed through shops, cafés, clubs and so on. Nestled between other genre-specific columns (a header lists 'house, funk, ragga, bhangra, reggae, soul . . . '), and entitled 'Funky Wisdom', the column was illustrated by a succession of piece outlines by Mr E and later Loco, from the 'Legal Walls' project (see below p172ff). Principally a review column, covering foreign and local releases, 'tha Wisdom' also operated as a switching point for a mass of information about what was happening in the American scene, what was on locally, and the promotion of Hip Hop as a culture.

Mig enjoyed a close relationship with the Lounge Room scene, in particular. He promoted the shop regularly, as the place to shop for records, often quoting Blaze as an aesthetic authority. He was particularly excited by the freestylers based around the Lounge:

Freestyling continues to be the creative literary scene that has expanded the creative potential of many of Sydney's young rhymers; it all began at The Lounge Room, the idea of Blaze and JU, who lent their store over to be inundated by all sorts of lyrical wizards (26 September, 1994: 28)

Repeatedly asserting the vitality of the local scene, Miguel responded to a fellow columnist's lamenting of the apathy of the Hip Hop scene, for example, Miguel wrote that

in reality there is plenty of activity . . . there is no need to fret . . . if you scratch the surface of what appears to be a very bland city, there is an amazing amount of diversity and activity in hip hop . . . Rappers like the Sleeping Monk are aiming for the future, working on the downlow, on the grassroots excursion, building up support from people who really appreciate their talent and quality . . . (July 25, 1994: 24)

The familiar discourses again: a teleological, authentic Hip Hop "coming up", full of promise. "Genuine", "underground", "real","authentic" recur as leitmotifs throughout Miguel's journalism. He condemned one local crew's album, for example, for
"interpolat[ing] their sound with references to authenticity to keep the feel of reality . . . it's not that I doubt the reality of government neglect, racism, snobbery . . . crime and frustration that exists in Sydney's Western Suburbs," he continues, "it's just White Boys' West Side doesn't do any justice to the realities faced daily by youth there." Later in the same column, Miguel identified "the real thing"; 046's album, isn't "posing or posturing", but expressive of a "genuine identity", evidenced by the "rough" quality of the recording. Miguel discerns in this roughness a "lack of technology", the "limits of small scale production" requiring a compensatory "inventiveness" which bespeaks authenticity (May 29, 1994: 26).

Miguel's column functioned as an interface between theory and practice, a site from which academic thinking about youth culture was brought into contact with 'youth culture' itself. Arguing that "maintaining an underground culture relies . . . on the transmission of . . . alternative perspectives through the magazine medium", for example, Miguel quotes and glosses three long sentences from Tricia Rose's Black Noise. "We aren't just talking vinyl, magazines, walls, free street papers," Miguel continues, offering his own précis of the Hip Hop Mediascape, "but an ever growing number of media including the Internet" (June 5, 1995: 28). Reviewing Lawrence Stanley's collection of rap lyrics (1992), for example, Miguel explains that

so much of hip hop's lyrics are part of an underground dialogue that is often so culturally bound and coded . . . that to examine them with no reference point . . . is stupid (August 22, 1994: 24)

And critiquing the mass media's approach to Hip Hop, one column taking Richard Guilliat's review of the Americanisation of Australian youth culture to task (Guilliatt 1994), and arguing instead that the perceived imitation is in fact "an expression of the solidarity that youth in Australia feel with minority youth in America" (July 4, 1994: 22).
I could write another ten thousand words on Miguel’s output, but won’t. Instead, I will turn to the final dimension of the Hip Hop Mediascape, where we will find him again: radio.

c) Hip Hop radio

In mid 1994, the A.B.C.’s “youth network”, 2 JJJ-FM put Public Enemy’s new album on high rotation. Miguel was furious, writing that he was well and truly sick of the hand job dished out to a substandard PE product being flogged on the ‘Js’.

“This station”, he continued, has been hard at work play-listing some of the most substandard music posing as hip hop . . . simply accepting and pushing the product that the record companies want them to.

But it hadn’t always been that way: recall Blaze’s testimony (page 64, above): it was on the ‘Js’ that Hip Hop was first broadcast with any regularity, on Tim Ritchie’s Saturday night new releases show through the early 1980s. And in 1990, amidst a furore over their playing of NWA’s “Fuck tha Police”, the staff of JJJ (including Ritchie) took themselves off air, replacing scheduled programmes with an endless loop of another NWA track—Express Yourself.

Rap forced its way onto commercial play lists in the early 1990s as artists such as MC Hammer, Salt’n’Pepa and Vanilla Ice made inroads into the charts. Public Enemy, Ice T, and later Naughty by Nature, Ice Cube and Arrested Development all received attention from JJJ, although commercial stations tended to revert to adult-oriented and nostalgia-driven play-listing from the mid-1980s. Even JJJ focussed more upon ‘alternative-indie-grunge’ into the 1990s. The only place to hear Hip Hop was on specialist programmes on public broadcast stations.

In addition to his weekly column, every Tuesday afternoon, Miguel broadcast his Hip Hop show from 2 SER-FM, a public station
based in the tower block of Sydney’s University of Technology. Blaze also hosted a fortnightly Hip Hop show on another similar station, 2 MBS-FM: Funkin’ Lessons went to air in the wee hours, featuring wall to wall beats. Miguel’s broadcasts were more magazine-like in format, featuring new releases, guest DJs and selectors, interviews with visiting artists and local rappers, writers and breakers, and, particularly through the latter part of 1994, freestyles live to air courtesy of the Lounge Room crews. The studio would often hold half a dozen b-boys, relishing the opportunity to strut and swear to a live audience: it was at one of these sessions that the battle, above, took place in mid 1994.

Shortly after that episode, Miguel put together a radio documentary titled “Hip Hop Culture in Sydney”. Over the course of an hour, editing together freestyle grabs and his own on-air interviews, Miguel presented his analysis of the scene, arguing that

in the Australian context, Hip Hop’s movement has come out of the ranks of suburban and migrant youth whose dissatisfaction with the isolation of suburban living, unemployment, racism and the Anglo-Saxon dominance of Australian culture has caused them to identify with similar sentiments coming from African-American rap.

Hip Hop’s popularity, he continues,

rests on its adaptability, in that youth who are already familiar with substantial slabs of American culture but who see themselves as existing on the fringes of the mainstream of society readily identify with the anti-establishment sentiments of rappers from the underdeveloped inner-cities of the United States.

Word had got around, and Mig’s documentary reached a surprisingly broad audience within the scene, being met with general approval. Many expressed the feeling that they had been put ‘on the record’, and that Miguel’s on-going efforts were going quite a way towards redressing the ‘mainstream’ media’s misinformation about Hip Hop Culture.
And that is a good place at which to move on from this extended examination of the Hip Hop Mediascape to the last of Appadurai’s scapes, within the rubric of which I will be able to offer a summary of the ideas about what Hip Hop was understood to be.

**Ideoscape**

Ideoscapes, Appadurai says, are

concatenations of images . . . often directly political
[having] to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it . . . composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview. (9)

This ‘Enlightenment worldview’, Appadurai continues, involves a ‘master-narrative’ (cf Lyotard 1986) that presupposed “a certain relationship between reading, representation and the public sphere”, was constructed with a certain internal logic, and involved certain key words and images, “including ‘freedom’, ‘welfare’, ‘rights’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘representation’ and the master-term ‘democracy’” (10). Appadurai recognises that these words, and the concepts entailed by them are not, of course, fixed, but are subject to pragmatic and semantic fluidities. Processes of translation, from linguistic, geographical and temporal contexts result in misrecognitions and deliberate appropriations (“captures” says Appadurai, 11).

In the mass of discursive and ethnographic material discussed above, it is possible to discern a *Hip Hop Ideoscape*, an ideoscape which, I stress, is not only *my* analytical construct, but is discernible ethnographically: references were made to “the ideology of Hip Hop”, the “ideals of Hip Hop”, the “meaning of Hip Hop”. Hip Hop was understood as having an ‘ideological’ dimension, as simply being ideological.

We might, then summarise the ‘ideology’ of Hip Hop:

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One gains respect from one’s brothers in the community, by being true to one’s self, by expressing yourself, and by being true to the music. When you are being true, you will know. Individuals are discrete, sovereign beings, are free, and have rights (to expression, to be free from oppression) which transcend race, nationality, even religion (‘sex’ is not generally on the agenda as a political issue). Knowledge is rationally derived from first hand experience through the application of common sense. This experience is available from or on the street, the underground, from the margins, from positions of disempowerment. The shared experience of, or the ability to empathise with, oppression of any form (particularly racial and economic; sexual oppression is not really in the picture), allows social agents to transcend their differences, and to share a globally inclusive culture. Through an attention to the narratives of oppression—that is, an attention to getting knowledge, and the sharing of practice, white middle class teenagers can empathise, at a distance, with what happens to African-Americans in The Bronx, and can therefore participate in the culture of Hip Hop. Further, the vast majority of people in our slippin’ society no longer have access to true knowledge, or misrecognise it. Are brainwashed. Hip Hop, because it is from the streets, coming from the underground, is able to redress the false ideology consuming the world.

Hip Hop should be united, not divided. Members of the community should support each other and nurture their culture. Recall the letter writer to Raptanite (p162, above):

As long as they keep to them self and are true to the game there shouldn’t be a problem . . .

And they should represent themselves and their culture.
Representing 1

The use of the term representing simultaneously invokes at least two 'meanings' of the word: a 'political' meaning grounded in a sense of liberal democratic processes, and a what I will call a 'semiotic' meaning, grounded in particular assumptions about the relationship of practice to meaning itself.

In the first sense, a rapper representing, for instance, is understood to be 'standing-in-for' his (or, less frequently, her) absent colleagues. “Sydney Hip Hop representing” said J.U., claiming this status as representative, as one holding the right to speak for, or on behalf of a community. The rhetorical, or strategic, value of such a gesture is clear, as I hope I have demonstrated.

In the Introductory section above, I stressed the strategic dimension of this practice. I suggested that J.U. was attempting effect a hegemony of the Hip Hop discursive field, to position himself (and his ‘party’, perhaps, The Lounge Room scene) as authority, as legislators of what is and is not authentic Hip Hop. I want to emphasise again that I am not necessarily reducing the phenomena in question to 'power-relations', for there is also a ludic dimension to such moments of self-narrativisation, as I have suggested: serious fun. It feels good to locate one's self in an important context, as a 'repriserter'. There is a certain gratification in the sense of participating in a grand project, and as a central, representative of that project.

There are any number of empirical, quantative questions about the sustainability of assertions to representation: how many Hip Hoppers are there, how 'logically' or 'practically' sustainable is such a claim to representation, how organised are they, how 'political' are they, just how 'oppositional' is Hip Hop Culture, and so on. I am less interested by such questions, particularly those which tend towards an academicised agenda of enlisting youth cultural forms to positions of progressive political agency, however, than I am in understanding the assumptions about cultural processes within which such assertions are made. For in
claiming to represent in this way, J.U. and his friends are importing into their discourse a raft of understandings, of assumptions about the sovereignty of the individual, about 'self-expression', about 'freedom'. Values identical to what Appadurai calls the ideoscapes of 'the Enlightenment worldview'. Recall, too, Blaze's claim to rationality: "be rational..." he wrote, exhorting his readers to search out knowledge, to be smart, not to fall for the ideological mis-representations of 'the powers that be'.

The second sense of representation being used, that which I have called the 'semiotic' sense, is closely related to this first, liberal humanist political sense. To break, to rap, to write, is to represent the culture. 'Representation' is that of a cultural essence by a visible, demonstrative practice, understood as re-producing, in the present, something that already exists prior to the moment of the demonstrated production. That which is represented is absent: the paradigm is the same as that implied in the 'political' use of representation above. In his critique of the political economy of signs, Baudrillard (in the days prior to his becoming the pin-up boy of post-modernism) described this process as that of providing an 'alibi': the always absent referent 'guaranteeing', in its privileged status as transcendent, necessary, ontological 'presence', the 'meaningfulness', or even the possibility of meaningfulness of the sign (Baudrillard 1991)29. Practice 'makes sense' because behind it stands the (never seen, always elsewhere) thing represented by the practice.

Thus in the context of democratic politics, the absent body politic and the attendant will of the people is represented by a present politician, the absent Hip Hop Community/Culture/Nation is represented by the present rapper. In the context of cultural production, the absent cultural essence is represented by the present evidence of a practice. In each instance, the logic is identical, and, within the given cultural contexts, self-evident and therefore persuasive. And yet, cause and effect are inverted: it is, rather, the persuasiveness of the argument which yields the self-evidence of the logic, where, to effect an admittedly vulgar
distinction, persuasion is the realm of strategy. It is this putatively self-evident logic that is being invoked by claims to representation.

In other words, then, the ideology, the ideoscape, of Hip Hop is more or less identical with that of "the Enlightenment worldview" described by Appadurai (see above, p168). The Hip Hop scene I encountered offered no ideological critique other than positing that the rest of the world has fallen from the 'ideals' it purports to follows. In this respect, Hip Hop is deeply conservative. The discourses of Community and Nation, of self-expression and representation, and of Culture that are invoked are, far from being post-modern, discourses of highest, capital M Modernity.

The Pedagogy of Hip Hop in Practice: 'Legal Walls'

At Casula, one station further along the south-west railway line from Liverpool, an Arts Centre has been carved out of the shell of an old power station. The coal-fired turbines long since sold to choke the air of a third world state, so the surrounding parkland, overlooked by suburban four and five bedroom mansions, now alive with birdsong, feels pristine, and smells now, in the early spring of 1994, of the bush.30

Sensibly, the administrators of the new Arts Centre at Casula (the sole arts infrastructure resource in the south west region), have decided that one of the first community-oriented projects to be run at the Power House was to be a graffiti workshop. Responding to "a [sic] expressed need from young people who wanted a safe and legal environment to practice, explore and further develop their visual arts skills" (Angela Pasqua, Community Arts Officer, Liverpool City Council, quoted in Legal Walls Catalogue, 1994: 3), a community arts officer recruited a number of "youth aerosol artists" (ie. what you call writers/bombers/graffitists when you are trying to secure a grant) to conduct a two month series of
weekly classes, and placed advertisements in the local and urban regional press to recruit the other participants (Dryza 1994, Worrall 1994). The process was to culminate in a hung exhibition of the work in the Centre's impressive gallery space (the refurbished machine room of the power station), to be titled 'Legal Walls'. Paul (Ser Reck form Def Wish Cast, a.k.a. 'Unique'—his graff tag) did a bit of publicity on Miguel's show, and I tagged along (a personal highlight being on the day of my thirtieth birthday, when I executed my first ever graffito . . . but that's another story).

Day one of the workshop, and forty participants turned out, resplendent all in baggy jeans, plaid shirts, baseball caps, sneakers and so on. The four tutors were introduced by Tess, the convenor, who also issued all present with a card explaining to any potential inquisitor that the hereunder named card holder was participating in a council-funded 'aerosol art' workshop, and that is why, officer, the so-named individual is carrying a backpack crammed with cans of Tuxon, Krylon, and that special-ordered German paint (Buntlak) that arrived in heavily taped-up airmail packs, and was proving so popular. Tess stressed ideas of responsibility and warning that there were plenty of applicants for the project waiting to take the place of any miscreants. A handful of writers that I knew had turned up; I expressed my surprise at their being there. "We heard about it and thought that we could rack some paint" one of them told me. They were disappointed to see that Unique was one of the tutors, explaining that they wouldn't even think about stealing from him. They didn't appear the following week.

The participants were 'graded' according to their own assessment of their spray can aptitude. Advanced writers were to work with Minky, intermediate writers with David or Paul, beginners with Alan, and absolute novices (all the girls present, with one exception, joined this group) with Sharline. While the more experienced writers headed outside to have their style assessed by Paul or Minky, the other groups gathered in warm corners,
sheltered from the wind, or remained inside, to hear about the world they were about to enter.

Throughout the course of my research, I had consistently found it difficult to engage with any of the women (most frequently peripherally) involved in the scene. In the decidedly male-oriented Hip Hop milieu, women were generally seen and not heard. My access to them was carefully policed by boyfriends, who would be suspicious of my wanting to talk with them, explaining to me that they (the women) wouldn’t really have anything to contribute to my understanding, anyway. When I did manage to strike up a conversation with these women, I most often encountered a kind of acceptance of the menfolks’ activities, rarely encountering any expression of desire to be more actively involved in, for example, graffiti writing. I seized, then, the opportunity to follow Sharline’s group through that first morning.

Sharline had recorded a single in 1988, titled “Hardcore Love”, released on the Virgin compilation of early Australian Hip Hop, *Down Under By Law* (see Mitchell, 1996: 195). Six years later, she started to talk through her graffiti exploits to her group of a dozen or so neophytes, most of them younger than fourteen, all but one of them a girl. As they leafed through her ‘portfolio’ (including shots dating from her days as a photographic model), her small audience was, I saw, held spellbound by accounts of late night chases across the suburbs. Stressing that graffiti “is only one aspect of a whole culture,” Sharline spoke a geographical language of train-yards and railway lines, of her physical strength, and its necessity: girls don’t generally become writers, she explained, because they can’t run fast enough, or for long enough. Some chases, she said, lasted all night, traversing vast distances across the sprawling suburban emptiness of western Sydney, mostly on foot. The stories, related in an even, relaxed tone, always in the plural (“we ran all the way to . . .”, “we were going to the city . . .”) were all the more exciting for her being *female*. She talked of close calls, of using her status as a girl to bluff out transit police, laughing at what she saw as their stupidity: that they couldn’t tell
that Spice and Sugar were a girl’s tags (of course!). The semicircle of young listeners hung on her every word. Now a mother, and partner to Ser Reck (Unique/Paul Westgate), Sharline’s days of bombing were over. But back in the ‘West Side Posse’ days . . .

The details of Sharline’s account are not as important as the tone and intention of her narrative: the construction of a history that is both her own, and that of a ‘culture’. Here, Sharline was engaging in a pure oral history, highlighting the exciting moments, stressing the triumph of her culture, of her right to express, in the face of adversity. Longevity emerged in her account, as it does in so many accounts of the same phenomenon, as a key indicator of the viability (naturally) of the culture, of its strength, and above all, of this culture as precisely that: a culture. She spoke of “an ideology” and “ideals” for which Sharline and her friends were willing, at least in this reconstructed narrative, to risk so much for. That the police, or the transits, the ‘graff squad’, attempted to stop them was, she seemed to be suggesting, further evidence that what they were doing was strong, was somehow just and right.

The boys’ groups, being more advanced in their skills, were taken outside. Paint was distributed, and technique appraised. Immediate advice was dispensed to the more experienced writers: how to get thicker, steadier \textit{(fatter)}, drip-free lines; the angle to hold the cans for different effects; the arcane art of nozzle-modification. Minky pulled off a cap, and, with a knife, gouged out the spray-bore, explaining that volume of flow and spraying distance are the relevant variables, producing the desirably ‘fat’ lines of the expert writer, and so on, and so on. Over the following weeks, the tutors dispensed this hands-on advice, carefully monitoring individuals’ progress in all aspects of the practice, from the pencil and paper techniques required for the early planning of a piece, to the finessing of colours for the final fade-ins: the master-apprentice standard Hip Hop operational practice.

More importantly, however, this pedagogy of practice was invariably accompanied throughout the course of the workshop by
the 'culturalist' pedagogy of graffiti as being more than simply an artistic activity. Graffiti, whether a (master)-piece, a throw-up, or a quickly scrawled tag always, to use the term used within the scene, represented. Writing, of course, involves long hours of sustained activity and concentration: there is plenty of time to chat, to observe, to learn, even to help out (a less experienced writer will help out with a senior writer's piece: filling-in blocks of colour within the latter shape outlines; backgrounding; even doing some of the more technically demanding fading-in where colours meet). Paul, in particular, had gathered around him in his group a dozen or so boys, between 14 and 17 years of age, who literally hung on his every word, collecting anecdotes, gleaning 'sub-cultural capital', accruing their own particular received status, and generally basking in the presence of this key Sydney Hip Hop figure.

The second week of the workshop started off with a group screening of Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver's 1983 documentary "Style Wars". I asked Unique how often he had watched this film, and he laughed, saying "probably 60 times", explaining that he and his West Side friends had literally worn out the local video rental shop's copy: "every now and then one of the boys will go up to the video shop and get it out and we'll all get together have a few beers and watch it again, and get the lino out and that . . .".

Made in cinema verite style in 1982, the film contains, among its exploration of the burgeoning New York Hip Hop scene, footage of breaking battles between the seminal Bronx break-dancers Rock Steady Crew and their various challengers, and establishes the all important link, through the trope of 'culture', between rap, breaking and graffiti. One voice-over commentary used during the film formulates a street level version of what Feld calls an 'iconicity of style' (1994b): "when you rap, you rock the house; when you break, you rock your body; and when you write, you rock the city". Graffiti is to the city what break-dancing is to your won body is what rap is to your audience. For Unique, it was simply not possible to teach graffiti without this contextualisation,
"without telling them about the history, the culture, the traditions". That graffiti, bombing, tagging, piecing were all more than simply graffiti, bombing, tagging, piecing was driven home, week after week. There was a quite definite sense that what was being taught was (and this is the terms that was used time and again) “part of a culture”. And here is the interface between the personal and the ‘cultural’. Another of the tutors explained that graffiti was

my whole life. Originally styles, characters, keeping the whole culture underground. Staying true to the game, letting all the try-hard homies know it’s not just another phase, keeping the whole Hip Hop Culture alive . . . stay strong!

Allen Pena

At another session, towards the end of the two month period, the participants were asked to explain “what writing [graffiti] meant to them”. The room of thirty teenagers fell silent as everyone bent over their notebooks. I couldn’t help but feel that any school teacher watching this moment would feel envious of the level of concentration the project co-ordinator had elicited. The resulting texts were displayed next to their completed pieces, and published in the exhibition catalogue.

All the usual Hip Hop themes, the constituent elements of the Hip Hop ideoscape, are present in these bits of text; from the discourses of ‘self-expression’, addiction, various understandings of art as practice and social signifier, and so on . . . As remarkable is the polychromatic ethnoscape evidenced by the participants’ names: Central European, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Polynesian, Macronesian, Latin-American, and a fair number of Anglo-Saxon names. These accounts can be read as in part reflecting the success of the pedagogic efforts of the tutors. Further, however, I want to start to read them as revealing a moment of articulation between this pedagogic narrative and the affective dimension of the ‘performance’ of writing graffiti. One set
of responses foregrounded the phenomenological aspects of graffiti practice, often framed by familiar Hip Hop catchcries:

Writing is not crime! The adrenaline rush is unmatched by anything except sex and I like that too! Hip Hop don’t stop!!

*Jeckl*

Graff is exciting and a mad rush hour. I love walking up and doing pieces and then going back to have a look. Graff is better than having a girlfriend.

*Ziggy Pukowiec*

A variation upon this theme which anticipates those accounts invoking the ‘graff as self-expression’ discourse was offered by Chris Agiasotis:

The creation of the mind just brings out another piece. So grab a can and then step to the wall and you’ll understand the meaning of graff.

This recalls Fibular’s rhetorical musings on ‘The Hip Hop Nation’ in *Vapors* 8: “So how do you get there . . . put the needle on the record and ‘It’ll take you there’ . . . and if you still can’t find it, then chances are, you never will” (9).

Another group of responses invoked the ‘ideological’ discourses of graffiti (and Hip Hop Culture) as ‘expression’ and ‘identity’:

Writing is a group struggling for existance. It’s a cry to be recognised, to have identity. In other words, no sell out for me.

*Garry Trinh*

Graffity is about art in day to day life. Its about expressing dream to reality through graffity. Graffity is my life. Its a way of showing what I’m capable of and a way of expressing the feelings I have inside about myself and others.

*Michael Kiss*
Garry was of Vietnamese parentage, and studied science at the University of Western Sydney. He wasn't all that keen on rap music, citing the misogyny and swearing he claimed was endemic in rap as factors that repelled him. He was a keen photographer, documenting everything he saw.

Michael wrote Puma, and his piece for the 'Legal Walls' project was called "I.B.S. Dreamer". I.B.S. stood for "Inter-City Bomb Squad", a famous Western Sydney crew which included Unique among its members. Puma's black-bound 'piece-book' included pictures of the cartoon-bomb Def Wish Cast logo, press clippings about Def Wish Cast, and photographs of Unique's work as well as his own. He wore a Def Wish Cast t-shirt on most days that I saw him. His aspiration was to become a member of the I.B.S., and to rap himself. At the age of eighteen, his assertion that "graffity is my life" is to be taken quite seriously: his piece book was his pride and joy. He allowed me to video it one day (Paul/Unique allowed me to look through his piece books—he had several—but asked that I not photograph them or otherwise reproduce their contents; he had already done a stretch in prison for "malicious damage", and felt that there was evidence enough in there to have him put away for quite some time.) Often I would see Michael hunched over his own book, adding shadings to outlines, or simply looking through it with intense concentration.

A number of young women participated in the Legal Walls project. Almost all of them chose to develop the idea of graffiti as 'self-expression' in offering their account of what graffiti meant to them. Most had no graffiti experience, and became members of the group of neophytes tutored by Sharline. Sharline refused to concede that girls went about graffiti work any differently to boys. Rosa Garcia, of Philipino descent and Tina Loppacher, of mixed Malaysian and Swiss parentage worked together on a piece, and told me one day that when some of the boys, looking approvingly at their outlines, found out that girls had drawn them, immediately reversed their opinions about the quality of the work. Sure, they explained, Hip Hop culture is sexist, "but so is all
culture”. At age 15 and 16, neither of these girls considered themselves ‘feminists’, but were both clearly aware of ‘feminist’ issues. Accepting an overall culture of bias, they felt, nonetheless, free to pursue graffiti, or any other practice for that matter.

[Graffiti is] expressing the way you feel who you are. Where you’re from, it’s being yourself no matter what culture.

Rosa Garcia

Self expression through art (or anything else) is a right! It’s like freedom of speech. If art is a crime, legalize it!

Tina Loppacher

These sentiments were echoed by another female writer:

Writing means giving your individual opinion. It's a way of showing who you are, and expressing yourself.

Everlyn Rojas

Everlyn had been working with Catherine Ryan, a very fair skinned, blonde haired girl. Catherine one day joked about being the only ‘white’ girl involved in the project, telling everyone, to much amusement, that she felt like an alien.

Writing is expressing yourself, what you feel, think and what you like. Writing is silent poetry. Writing is a speaking picture.

Catherine Ryan

Amanda Pickstone was from Newcastle, about 160km north of central Sydney. She travelled to Casula (about 60km south-west of central Sydney) every weekend to participate in the project. She was a self-defined “tomboy”, worked in “a shop”, and was active in the Newcastle writing scene. She commented:

Every person has a different way of expressing themselves. This is our way. We don’t see it as a crime, but as a life.

Amanda Pickstone
Writing to me is one of the essential elements of Hip Hop Culture. It is a form of expressing in a different art form. To me being a writer means respect and you will be respected.

Kai Freestone

A number of responses developed metaphors associated with criminality:

What graff means to me? Well first I must say graff is words. You can’t put these words into words. The colours. The feel. An addict: that describes me because when you have an itch you scratch. Graff is in my blood and mind of me.

Craig Barnes

Craig was a Wollongong writer, who also co-hosted a weekly Hip Hop radio show on 2-BOX-FM in that city, about eighty kilometres to the south of central Sydney. He eagerly invited me out on bombing parties to the Wollongong train-yards in the wee hours of the morning, and claimed to be addicted to the thrill of illegal work. Addiction was a common trope for all aspects of Hip Hop practice. The Monk, for example, offered a similar account of the phenomenology of rapping one night. I had thanked him for a great night’s freestyling. “That’s cool, man,” he told me. “If I wasn’t doing it here I’d be doing it in my bedroom anyway.” Jason (Blaze) described the process of weaning himself off illegal graffiti as a “withdrawal” (Thwaite 1989: 73). The irreducibility of the experience of writing is also important: graffiti is ‘words that can’t be put into words . . .’

For some writers, graffiti didn’t belong in galleries:

Graffiti is expression of your ideas using a spray can. It’s a moment of art and instead of hanging our shit in galleries we hang it on walls, trains . . . it’s like public art for everyone to see. It’s misunderstood by others because we don’t use traditional methods. Like cavemen painted on walls.

Sacha Delfosse
Sacha wrote Loco, and was a frequent correspondent with Miguel at 3-D World. His commitment to the idea of the Hip Hop Community was almost total. His favourite t-shirt was one which bore the logo “Fuck Censorhip” in large, bright red letters. His school books were covered in outlines and photographs of pieces. There was nothing else about him to identify him as a writer, a bomber, or a devotee of hip hop. He wore short, neat hair, Levi jeans or track suit pants. He pulled off a minor coup when, for the ‘work experience’ component of his school work he was able to spend two weeks as an assistant at The Lounge Room, Blaze and J.U.’s Hip Hop Shop. He comments here on the status of graff as what in another context might be called ‘outsider art’; indeed, the tension between graff as ‘high art’, exhibited in galleries (see Nelson and Gonzales 1991; vi-viii) and what Sacha here understands as its essence as a ‘public’ or ‘street’ art is important. A writer commissioned to do ‘legal work’ would often feel obliged to assert their successful manipulation of the commissioning agent or institution, thereby averting potential allegations of having ‘sold out’. For the tutors engaged in this project, being paid to teach graffiti was understood as affirming the ‘cultural’ status of their practice.

Writers frequently impressed upon me the “age-old” qualities of graffiti, one in particular pointing out that archaeologists had uncovered “graff at Pompeii”. Loco here is able to locate himself and his practice within an even longer tradition, traceable back to, apparently, Lascaux. To write on walls, to leave a mark, he is suggesting, is nothing new, and more than that, it is almost natural.

Still others focussed upon the aesthetic appeal of graffiti:

Graffiti is a way for me to express myself and create something no one else has thrown up before. It makes a plain wall worth looking at.

Kylie Wyte

People shouldn’t think it’s a wrong thing to do because it’s on walls. Well I think it’s a good thing so it will
make the wall stand out.  

Raymond Setchell

What graff means to me. Art, mates, good times, chance of being caught and seeing my own work.

Peter Brisbane

In my fieldnotes I referred to this last writer as ‘the aesthete’. He took hours agonising over his piece, trying to decide at which angle a particular letter bar should bend in order to complete the composition. His frequent, very public processes of colour selection, involving consultations with whoever was to hand, and extended debates about the quality of “the strawberry” or “the lilac”; his concern that too much use of pink (‘fuscia’, the label said) would make his work look like “a girl’s piece” caused much hilarity.

At thirteen, one of the youngest writers, Raymond told me that his mother was very concerned about his becoming involved in graffiti. He carried a small pocket camera, and took pictures of every bit of graffiti he saw, anywhere. He relished the opportunity to hang out with older writers, and eagerly sought my attention, making sure that I knew what he was doing. Raymond’s express desire to ‘make a wall stand out’ brings to my mind one of the most striking images contained in Chalfant’s photo-documentation of New York train graffiti: a luridly coloured train streaks past the bleak, post-industrial urban landscape, a flash of life in an otherwise monochromatic wasteland (see particularly Cooper and Chalfant, 1984: 2-3, 52-53, 76-77, 91, 96-97). Another writer explained to me that “when I see a piece, it’s like a sign of life, man, it means that someone has been there.” Or, as Kylie puts it: “It makes a plain wall worth looking at.”

Indeed, over the period of my own research into the scene, I came to ‘read’ the city differently. Not necessarily to read it ‘better’, just differently. I recall my excitement the day that I first recognised a tag, on a bus (it was actually Blaze’s). To at least one journalist, graffitists were
“artists” [diacritics in original] who leave complicated spray-can paintings that are in fact coded messages for other graffiti writers . . .

(Deborah Cameron in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of January 25th, 1993:13)

I came to realise that tags were not so much a ‘code’ to be deciphered, as simply marks, autographs, signatures: signs of life.

Boarding a train with a crew, or with a bomber, for example, viewing the carriage through their eyes, I began to experience a subtle shift of understanding, of looking. So efficient had the Sydney Transit Authority been at removing graff from the plastic surfaces used for the internal walls and seat covers of trains (posters in the carriages pledged that all such graffiti would be removed within 24 hours), that bombers had given up marking the walls to instead tag up the floor of the carriages. As we would board a train, all eyes turn to the floor, matted with layers of felt-tip pen (“texta”) tags. The bombers scanned the entire carriage, reading the train, noting who has “got up”, who is using a new tag (“X is writing Y”).

Trains hold a particular cachet amongst writers: ‘getting up’ is not about staking out territory, it is about almost the exact opposite, a ubiquity, a territorialisaton of space rather than a spatialisation of territory. Trains carry your tag, or your panel, your throw-up the length of a city, or even a state. Hanging around with writers, a passing train would stop conversation; heads would snap around, even though unless the train was a ‘coalie’ there was little chance that any graffiti would be visible for more than a couple of days at the most.38
Coda (‘tag’)

Although there is plenty more to be written about graffiti, I want to move on now. I have barely touched upon the various ‘social’ issues posed by writing; the ‘air of menace’ created by tagging, for example, is very real, and was the principle motivation for the massive anti-graffiti mobilisation in New York (Castleman 1982:176; Cameron 1993: 13). Writers often frankly enjoy creating this sense of menace, even if they are not themselves likely to be propigators of violence. Def Wish Cast, for example, celebrate “Runnin’ Amok” in the rap of that name:

Graff writers hijack a train and run a rampage . . .
A perfect example of youth overtaking the system
Are [sic] trains running with panels

The rich metaphorical language used to describe graffiti is loaded with violence: a train carriage completely daubed is wrecked, bombed, wasted. Watching Matthew Peet (the very famous Mr E/Mystery) piece one day, a passing elderly gentleman commented to me that these boys were clearly “very artistic”, and not at all like those “vandals” who destroy public property. Of course, the ‘artist’ and the ‘vandal’ are one and the same person.

Many writers have spent time in junior detention centres, charged with malicious damage under the Crimes Act (copies of which, along with a highlighted photocopy of a dictionary definition of ‘malicious’, were given to me by the Graffiti Task Force at the end of one of my visits to their headquarters—just to ensure that I was labouring under any romantic illusions about the potential worthiness of graffiti, I suppose). Turning eighteen offers the disincentive of a spell in an adult prison: very few writers maintain an illegal practice into adulthood, seeking instead commissioned legal or council-sanctioned work. Paul/Unique had served time in weekend detention, assuring me that “prison is one place you do not ever want to go”. I believed him.  

I spent long days and nights watching graffitists, writers, bombers piecing, tagging, throwing-up. And although there is not the space
in this current thesis to fully explicate the practices I observed, or
to recount any of the dozens of anecdotes of my encounters with
the writers, or, for that matter, with their nemeses, the officers of
the Graffiti Task Force with whom I also spent some time\textsuperscript{41}, let me
recount what is—upon reflection—my favourite graffiti story\textsuperscript{42}.

I had invited Mick E and E.S.P. up to my apartment to play some
music and have a chat about their 'battle' with J.U.. At one point in
our conversation, we were talking about graff. I asked if they
were still actively writing. They laughed and Mick said "when the
opportunity presents itself", and E.S.P. added "yeah, mostly just at
friends places, on their walls, you know," and they exchanged a
laugh which I assumed pertained to some private joke, and the
conversation moved along.

Well, I had been right: there had been a private joke, and it had
been on me. Later that night, I went to get some milk, taking the
stairs down the four flights to the street below and returned a few
minutes later (to write up my notes with a milky cup of tea),
stepping into the elevator of my apartment building, a security
block in Sydney's Kings Cross, a nightclub and strip-joint part of
town.

And, (of course, I later understood), the elevator was covered in
graffiti; tags snaked across the mirror in still fragrant thick black
marking pen.

Mick and E.S.P. had bombed it.
Footnotes

1 I should note that of course this difference, and the specificity of each local incarnation of Hip Hop Culture can be either emphasised or downplayed in given contexts, as agents locate themselves within tactically desirable positions.

2 By a fluke of geography, Melbourne's western suburbs stand to the 'cosmopolitan' centre of that city as Sydney's western suburbs stand to the 'centre' of Sydney, suffering from the same demonisations (see below).

3 At a freestyle session at The Lounge Room, August 1994, Pewbic tha Hunta is struggling on the mic, looking around, trying to find (inspiration for) his verse. He spies Miguel, and breaks the room up with this great rhyme:

   What's this in front of me?
   I see see a Pakistani

4 Coolie Boy Productions (1994)

5 Paula and Goie were disappointed that Blaze did not attend one of their performances after they had invited him; only months later, after Black Justice had attracted a bit of publicity, they told me, did Blaze make the attempt to contact them.

6 (London Weekly Television 1992)

7 Cable television didn't hit A.U.S.T. until the mid 1990s; prior to that, a syndicated, locally produced and play-listed 'MTV' screened twice weekly (Friday and Saturday, late) on a free-to-air channel. Rap was, at best, on low rotation.

8 Interview with Graham Godbee of Pulse Consultants.

9 See Maxwell 1994b.

10 See, however, Appendix III for my favourite newspaper clipping addressing these issues.

11 This kind of newspaper article seemed to surface every few months: see also Hutack and Borham 1994; Steyn 1994 and Petkovic, Kokokiris and Kalinowska 1995, in addition to the other articles quoted.


13 Rose cites, from conversations with The Source editor James Barnard, a pass-along rate for the magazine in the United States, of "approximately 1 purchase for every 11-15 readers" (Rose 1994: 8). The relatively high cost of the 'zine in Australia is offset by the higher disposable incomes of perspective buyers and the status with which possession of a latest issue endows the owner: I would suggest that the pass-along rate is perhaps a little lower in Australia. Rose also suggests that The Source enjoys "a prominently black teen readership" (ibid). This is an understanding (assumption?; Rose offers no data to support this assertion) operant in the Sydney milieu, constituting part of the magazine's appeal: it is black (and therefore, at that point where the discourses of black and authenticity map onto each other), real.

14 For an analysis of Blaze's substantial body of reviews in Vapors, see below, pp141ff.
15 Apocryphal anecdote shared with every prospective jazz player: to learn how to play saxophone you have to learn to walk back. That is, to walk on the backbeat: one-two, one-two, rather than one-two, one-two...

16 Care was taken to ensure that the album was released on (scratchable) vinyl, as well as on CD format. See pp294ff below for an extended analysis of the musical texts of both these albums, and for a consideration of the response to them of the Hip Hop scene.

17 For reasons (other than the requisite attention to scholarly verisimilitude) that will become apparent, in this and in all subsequent quotes from various Hip Hop sources, I have endeavoured to retain the original typographic features and layout of the text (typefaces, paragraph breaks etc), as well as the various idiosyncratic (deliberate) misspellings and usages. I have also retained what may be involuntary misspellings and grammatical errors without using (sic), in order to retain the flavour of the original documents. My own elisions within such quotes are marked within square brackets thus: [ . . . ].

18 A ‘Zines’ review page in Hype 19 (page 21) includes rundowns and subscription addresses for I.G.T. (International Get Hip Times), Underground Productions (“from Sweden but all the text is in English”), Over Kill (from Germany, with “22 pages of mouth watering trains”) and Hardcore from Sydney. “Hardcore,” we read “has 16 pages all with a clear and easy to follow layout.”

19 The first issue of Vapors is commemorated in a graffiti piece on a prominent wall in inner-city Newtown (a couple of hundred metres from the University of Sydney). In pride of place, amongst a selection of news­clippings about the terror of the graffiti gangs, and next to a goateed, spray-can wielding b-boy, the first page of Vapors Number One is reproduced.

20 Other writers credited for articles here include Wizdm and Mr E of The Brethren, Fibular and Felicité. Four others, including Blaze’s girlfriend (later wife) Angela, receive “Special Thanx” along with “all others that hassled me in the streets”, this being yet another evocation of ‘the street’ as a locus of (therefore authentic) Hip Hop practice. Note also the inconsistency in the spelling of the magazine’s name, oscillating between the Anglo and American conventions: ‘Vapours/Vapors’. I have generally adopted the Americanised spelling, as it appears, as a ‘piece’ outline, on the Vapors masthead.

21 I do not have the space to review the literature about rap and censorship. Gates 1990, Gore 1987, Morley 1992, Stanley 1992, Peterson-Lewis 1991 offer various perspectives on this issue; all the standard Hip Hop references also offer extended commentaries on censorship and the right to freedom of expression: fascinatingly, Jones’ rather weak celebration of “the Young Lions of America” in his 1994 The Story of Rap, written from an insider’s perspective, coyly censors his transcription of the hard-hitting freestyles of the Oakland based Souls of Mischief crew (1994: 10-12), either using a dash to mask offensive words (“sh—t” for ‘shit’), or else completely omitting the offending items.

22 ‘Motherfucker’

23 Public Enemy’s “Brothers Gonna Work It Out” from 1989’s contains a sample from James Brown’s 1967 anthem to black power “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved” (1967).
New York, of course, is the place of origin, the source, of (Hip Hop) graffiti, as I have been told dozens of times. The expression "home" recurs, as does the phrase "spiritual home", in discussion of New York: even now, when graffiti has all but disappeared from the New York subway, writers still make haj-like pilgrimages (this word, too, has been used to describe to me the import of such a trip) to the Big Apple to see where it all started. "There's a special feeling you get when you go to where something began" one writer told me of his visit to Manhattan.

Educational books, widely understood as espousing 'traditional' values directed at young children.

Another article, entitled 'Back to the Roots', apologised for the absence of any news about breaking in recent months:

Unfortunately, this section has been vacant for a while but it's back to stay. This is the dance form of the Hip Hop culture, not half-stepping, so don't get confused by the real deal . . . (Hype Volume 1, Issue 2: 21)

See below, page 160.

A credit hidden on page 2 qualifies this claim, noting that "this is not really printed on hemp paper, but it should be, as soon as hemp is made legal, we'll use it! "One acre of hemp will produce as much paper as four acres of trees"!!"

My thanks to Jennifer Leahy for this material. The Powerhouse turbines were sold to the Indian government when it was decommissioned in 1976. The site was purchased by the Liverpool Council for a nominal sum later that year, and in 1985, the Council resolved to create the Powerhouse Regional Arts Centre as a community cultural facility comprising studio, exhibition and performance spaces. In the interim, the proximity to the railway line, and the apparent decrepitude of the building attracted the attention of graffitists and (other?) vandals. The decision to mount the products of the Legal Walls project as the first art exhibition in the Powerhouse gallery was at least partly a strategic one, designed to both offer up the space as a resource for local youth, and to hopefully enlist the graffitists' own code of 'respect' as a kind of self-regulatory mechanism. By granting the writers a sense of responsibility for the space, and offering them an investment in it, the Council's Officers hoped to reduce the likelihood of subsequent damage to the Arts Centre. From material compiled by Liverpool City Council as design brief for the Powerhouse Regional Arts Centre.


The ethnographic and sociological literature concerned with what Brewer calls 'Hip Hop Graffiti' (1992) is still developing. Lachmann's 1990 sociological essay dealing with the 'ideology' of graffiti practice is seminal, as is Castleman's ethnography (1982). I do not have the time to explicate the sociological material here, but do want to note that the social organisation and pedagogy of graffiti practice in the local scene closely mirrors the accounts found in these sources. Devon Brewer's ethnographically impressive (and sympathetic) work (1992, and with Marc Miller 1990) is oriented towards 'solving' the 'problem' of graffiti (the latter article appearing in the journal Deviant Behaviour). Less impressively researched local (Australian) work published in The
Australian Police Journal (Budd 1989) is oriented, understandably given the context of publication, towards the recognition and apprehension of bombers.

33 Chalfant's photojournalistic picturebooks (Cooper and Chalfant 1984, Henry and James Prigoff 1987) are also in heavy circulation within the Sydney scene. I was advised, only half jokingly), that if I wanted to see these books myself, I would have to special order them: with some pride, it was explained that all available copies had been liberated \( \text{(racked)} \) from every local library in the Sydney area, and that bookshops refused to stock them. Such stories were, of course, apocryphal.

34 And indeed, over the weeks to come, waiting for paint to arrive, or when enthusiasm for the concentrated pencil and paper work of preparing and colour-coding outlines faded, or simply when the siren song of the Def Wish Cast tape on one of its seemingly endless loops through a ghetto blaster (it was always Def Wish Cast) proved irresistible, some of the boys would practice break moves on the linoleum floor of one of the workshop rooms—occasionally even Ser Reck would himself treat us to a few spins.

35 But see Carrington (1989) for an analysis of the qualitative differences between boys' (ie 'Hip Hop') graffiti and girls' graffiti, as observed in inner-western Sydney in the late 1980s.

36 Minky Rawat, tutor to the advanced group, went even further, basing his entire graffiti practice upon the letter 'E'. He explained in the catalogue that

\[ \text{the need for the most individual style leads us to focus on our ability to manipulate the alphabet as we know it, and re-create it in a language that, although it may seem foreign to some, determines one's stature in a scene where having a 'def style' signifies the ultimate accomplishment.} \]

"It's all" he concludes, "about the letters."

37 Begging, once again, a Derridean analysis: graffiti as logocentric practice \textit{par excellence} (Minky's practice, figuring, then, as a radical \textit{reductio} of this to 'characterocentrism'). And my thanks to Lisa Stefanoff, who wanted me to emphasise the phallologocentric implications of a practice involving groups of boys, travelling around the city, leaving 'fat' traces of their names on every viable surface.

38 A 'coalie' was a coal train, the individual carriages of which could be pieced in geographically remote lay-ups, where security was generally more lax than it was for suburban trains. By the 1990s, overnight chemical buffing of the exterior of train carriages reduced the incentive to invest vast amounts of time, energy, paint and so on in covering a train with an elaborate piece (not to mention the risk of personal injury and possible arrest). See Cooper and Chalfant (1984 100) for an account of the development of 'the buff' in New York; Castleman offers an amusing account pointing to the buff's deleterious effects of the solvent on rubber fittings, and on the very spray nozzles used to apply it (1982 152-155).

39 And indeed, a scrawled explosion of tags across the whitewashed walls of a corner shop or the pastel façade of a gentrified inner city terrace house will not necessarily be taken as a sign of life by the householder or shopkeeper (or at any rate, not a sign of \textit{desirable} life). One afternoon I arranged to meet with a Diane Barnes, whose advertisement offering a free graffiti removal service I had seen in a local newspaper, at the bottom of an article about a despairing shopkeeping graffiti victim \textit{(The...}
Glebe, March 1, 1993). Diane belonged to an organisation called 'The Way to Happiness Foundation', an organisation, I was to discover, based upon the writings of a certain L. Ron Hubbard ("the first non religious moral code based wholly on common sense" reads The Way to Happiness the booklet Diane left me). Diane had absolutely no sympathy for graffitists, telling me simply that "they are scum".

40 On a lighter note, Sharline told me that Paul managed to convince the authorities at the weekend detention centre to allow him to execute a piece behind bars. It got so, she laughed, that he'd look forward to the weekends.

41 At my risk, I was warned by some writers, who suggested that if I were to be seen with the 'transits' by writers who didn't know me, I would be labelled a 'nark', and risk the (unspecified) consequences.

42 'Upon reflection', because at the time, the incident caused me several weeks of post-graduate anxiety.
Part 3: The Hip Hop Social Imaginary

On Stage

I saw Def Wish Cast perform perhaps a dozen times over a period of two years. Their show always started with Def Wish himself, a slight, crew-cutted, somewhat boyish figure in an Adidas shell-suit, t-shirt, hi-tops and a baseball cap bearing his crew’s logo (a Roadrunner and Coyote bomb in the shape of a map of Australia, its fuse sparking, ready to explode). This, Def Wish explained to me, was the only baseball cap he’d ever countenance wearing. Grabbing his microphone (preferably a radio mike, but more often one trailing several metres of cord) in both fists, Def Wish would take a massive breath, hauling his shoulders high, up to his ears, and then, abruptly, lunge forward and downwards, bending over the mike, launching himself into an a capella ragga rap, usually the thirty second introduction to “They Will Not Last”. The words (Blaze memorably reviewed Def Wish’s style as “syllable ballistics”) tumble out, Def Wish interpolating burbling grabs, rolling his tongue, using the plosive effect of the release of air tongue-dammed against the hard palate. The overall effect is of a series of jack-hammer explosions, punctuated by the shrieking intake of a fresh breath, his whole body lurching upright, ribs visibly expanding inside his t-shirt, and then plunging down and forward again, seemingly squeezing every last gasp of air from his body, literally wringing the words out.

In half a minute it is over, and Def Wish, sweat dripping down his face, his oversize t-shirt wetly flapping from his shoulders, is joined by the other MCs. Ser Reck is older, bearded, his long hair pulled back into a pony tail. He wears, as a rule, a Def Wish Cast t-shirt and baggy black pants. Die C is completely bald, except for a thin ‘rat’s tail’ falling from the back of his clean-shaven pate. He is angular, shorter than he appears on stage, and more often than not
wears a dark t-shirt and black track pants. Both try to literally jump onto the stage; their talk is always of making an ‘impact’, of ‘hitting’ the stage and audience. Throughout the performance all three rappers will stalk the stage, trailing spaghetti trails of microphone leads as they cross and recross each other.

I most often saw Def Wish Cast perform in small club venues, often supported by four or five other crews. A tiny raised stage was generally provided, and upstage, DJ Vame would work at his console, a calm, measured counterpoint to the studied frenzy of the rappers downstage. A mixing desk at the back of the room would be manned by the sound engineer, who was responsible for running the digital audio tape (DAT) backing track and for monitoring microphone levels. The exchange between the rappers and DJ on stage and the sound engineer at the opposite end of what was usually a small, dark, sweaty, smoky and noisy room was a feature of virtually every performance I saw: “Stop the DAT... stop the DAT motherfucker...” or “louder... louder” and so on.

Def Wish Cast throughout this period had a standard performance list: five or six tracks, each of which included a verse from each rapper and serious cutting and scratching from Vame through the breaks. As each rapper launched into his own rhymes, the other two would try to move upstage, loose heads nodding to the pulse, loping around whatever space was available, flicking and tugging at leads, eyes often closed, holding their mike down next to their solar plexus. The choreography was not particularly sophisticated, but questions of focus and the directing of the audience’s attention had certainly been taken into account. Every rapped line would include at least one syllable ‘punched’ by the other two rappers; their upstage stalking would momentarily arrest, microphones would be brought up, touching lips, and all three would form momentary, fleeting friezes, which I now recall as a series of strobe-flashed tableaux: Def Wish drops to his haunches, arm outstretched, palm open to the audience, his face shadowed under his laced-up hoodie, the others stand behind him, to either side,
pressing to him, outside arms extended upwards and outwards, palms open, an expansive, open-chested gesture, eyes turned to the heavens? into the spotlights as, in unison, they shout “west-side” and the tableau immediately dissolves into more pacing (“like a panther” rapped L.L. Cool J), more convulsive downstage rapping. A rapped reference to the DJ (“DJ Vame / going sick as a renegade!”) sees all three lunge upstage, dropping to their knees, gesturing to the console as Vame, calmly, methodically, his wrists loose, almost elegant or even dainty (he would love me saying so) flick and flip and twist and fly, cajoling halting, stuttering rhythmic squeaks, rasps, gurgles and squeals from the vinyl on the turntables, and the boys turn downstage, striding back towards their audience.

And this audience, when the crew is on song, thumps. The dance of choice for Def Wish shows is a frenetic pogo, harking back to the unremembered days of punk. The boys commented on this, laughingly. They don’t know how it started; “in Melbourne, or something” offers Def Wish. It’s almost a mosh-pit, but even more dangerous. Down at the front it is all boys in flannel shirts, usually soaked with beery sweat. As the night progressed, they’d be drunker and drunker, the slicked, big boned youths careering into each other in boozy imitations of Australian Rules Footballers ‘hip and shouldering’ each other, falling over, sometimes hitting each other, dragged apart, spilling over into, and scattering the more sedate outer ring of spectators in a domino-effect-like chain-reaction. Such displays inevitably fuelled venue-managers’ antipathy towards rap acts, confirming fears of the inherent violence and ‘gang’-orientation of the scene. As a result, few venues were willing to risk hosting Hip Hop nights, although this had as much to do with the minimal revenue such evenings could generate: a bunch of late teenage-early twenty something Hip-Hoppers simply don’t have the spending power of a similar crowd of university students or ‘straight’ folk. Such rough-housing, although unpleasant to experience, was not necessarily any more marked at Hip Hop nights than at any number of pub rock’n’roll gigs.
Between raps, the crowd punch the air in unison, playing out its half of the antiphonic banter as the crew sorts itself out for the next track . . . “west side! west side! west side!” or “whoa-oh! whoa-oh!” (listen to the posse using this call on Guru’s album “Jazzmatazz”). Further back in the crowd there are more women, and people move to the pulse (it virtually demands it of you), carefully negotiating the occasional efflorescent pogo-melee. A surprising number of people of both sexes rap along to every verse, the whole room exploding into a manic crush as the crew belts out the glorious, broad-accented, quintessentially suburban chorus of ‘Runnin’ Amok’:

Runnin’ amok!

Is that your head or did your neck throw up?
Runnin’ amok!

Is that your head or did your neck throw up?
Runnin’ amok!

Is that your head or did your neck throw up?
Runnin’ amok!

Is that your head or did your neck throw uuuu-uup?

And then, sometimes, often, Ser Reck would point to the floor in front of the stage, and shout at the crowd there . . . the first time I didn’t know what was happening . . . a fight? An injury (there is always a fight and an injury)? But no . . . Def Wish dives off the stage and he’s breaking, there, amidst all that spilt beer and cigarette butts and broken glass and god knows what. Hardly anyone can see his performance as they strain over each others’ shoulders, laughing, cheering, clapping. Then it’s Die C’s turn, and Ser Reck, and Vame is still going sick, cutting it up, smiling, building a stack of used records on the piece of tatty carpet beside the console (surely, I used to think, they must take more care of these records?).

And in the panting breaks between tracks, as the sound engineer struggles to cue the DAT, and the microphone lead tangle is unravelled, one of the rappers (it’s usually Ser Reck) will announce what they are doing: “Sydney Hip Hop!” or “support Australian Hip
Hop!” or simply “representing all the crews!!!” Cheers go up, the tape is ready to roll, and we are all flung into the next four minutes of driving beats.

‘Staging’ Hip Hop in Sydney

Given that they are ‘imagined’ communities that cannot be experienced empirically in their totality, and whose identity is often contested, nations cannot be understood outside the relations of power that give certain groups the possibility of simultaneously representing, constructing and . . . staging the nation.

Ghassan Hage,Republicanism, Multiculturalism, Zoology (1993b: 126)

The Hip Hop social imaginary, constructed in practice from the various *imaginal* resources dealt with in the preceding sections, was, as we have seen, troped through three metaphors—those of Community, Nationalism, and Culture. That, within the scene, in the various writings, accounts and raps, a sentence could start off with ‘Hip Hop Nation’ and end up with ‘Hip Hop Culture’, or that ‘Community’ can substitute within a thought or utterance for the word ‘Culture’ is itself suggestive of a perceived *unity* of reference that was assumed to underpin the various practices and beliefs being described. In so many words I would be told that the Hip Hop Community, Culture and Nation simply are “the same thing”. In my own account then, these will be somewhat leaky categories; following the orthodox ethnographic distinction between the ‘emic’ and the ‘etic’, building my account from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. As a result, discourses about ‘the Hip Hop Nation’ segue into, are conflated with, come together in the accounts of the social agents involved.
I am interested in both the 'why' and the 'how' of these discourses: why 'culture', 'community', 'nation'? What is the meta-cultural context that incites, elicits, provokes, perhaps offers no alternative to, these constructions of social being? How do these agents position themselves in relation to them; how do they use them, what are they experiencing as they use them? How do they sustain these ideas in their practice? Rather than predicating a sociological phenomenon that might be called 'the Sydney Hip Hop Community', and setting out to document that thing, I want to focus upon the manner in which discourses of community, nationhood and culture circulate, are reproduced, operate and are operated upon by that diverse group of social agents using or being positioned by them. If, in what follows, I appear to reify Hip Hop Culture/Community/Nation, any such usage is to be considered under erasure: a convenient fiction with which to subsume various discourses, which, conflated, negotiated, circulated become the idea of Hip Hop. And in such circumstances, this process is analogous to and descriptive of the very manner in which, I am suggesting, such discourses come to stand for, in the 'real world', in the lived experience of those social agents with whom this account is concerned, putatively antecedent cultural essences. Following Bhabha's insights into the processes of becoming a national, this consolidation of discourse, this articulation of practice to regulating discourses operates to narrate a belongingness, to locate the self, and the self's experience of being to continuities of experience, the authority, or persuasiveness of which is supported by elaborate logics of intertextuality and mimesis.

The term 'community' was used by individuals active in the Hip Hop Scene to describe what they understand as their culturo-ethical project. The discursive context that encouraged this usage, naturalises the term 'community', making its use appear appropriate, desirable, even, perhaps, necessary. There were also socio-political benefits which flow from the use of the term, and the micro-political efforts of individuals within the scene in question to deny internal differences in claiming to speak for and
of, that ‘community’: the constant struggle to maintain borders and differences.

In practice the use of these terms was loosely determined by contextual factors. ‘Community’ was associated with notions of ‘immanence’ and with an organicist discourse of authenticity. Discourses of nationhood were compounded by what Hage refers to as the ‘dialogism’ of all nationalist discourses (1993a: 78; see below). Discourses of Hip Hop Culture might be characterised as ‘discourses of transcendence’, predicating an essential, unifying cultural ‘being’ which is held to generate, to be ‘represented’ by, and to ensure the coherence of, those practices.

Intercommunal Studies

In the pages that follow, I want to subsume the discourses of nation, community and culture under the rubric of ‘communality’, drawing upon the work of Ghassan Hage and Lesley Johnson of the Research Centre for Intercommunal Studies (R.C.I.S.) of the University of Western Sydney, which will then guide my discussion. Writing in the first collection of essays published by the R.C.I.S., Hage and Johnson described the goal of the Centre as being the provision of

a base for the generation of empirical research and theoretical reflection on the increasingly complex and important processes of social identification and communal formation taking place in the world today (1993: v)

The theoretical approach to the analysis of communality developed by Hage and Johnson advocates the rejection of “those analyses of community or communities that conceptualise these social forms as static and unproblematically conceived entities interacting with each other” (v). These popular understandings of ‘community’, they argue, revolve around a liberal democratic reading of the collective as meta-individual, as a kind of
democratic agent operating within the body politic from a position of consistent, metaphysical identity. Such accounts of community tends towards homogenising the group in question, and masking the \textit{Realpolitik} processes which determine the 'community' as it is experienced by its various 'members'.

First, "'communities'", they suggest, diacritically marking the term, and thereby withholding any reification of it as \textit{a priori} category, "are to be investigated as temporary, conjunctural manifestations of on-going processes of communal formation fuelled by internal struggles for the very creation of, and the right to speak in the name of, 'the community' . . . ."

Second,

\begin{quote}
[I]ntercommunal studies understands all forms of identification in the contemporary world as embodying within them, at least implicitly, a desire for communality . . . (v)
\end{quote}

A "desire for communality" here constitutes somewhat of both a given and a horizon of investigation. I want to withhold my concurrence (or otherwise) with this assertion for the time being: towards the end of this thesis, rather than taking up the seductive challenge of a reductive, transhistorical psychoanalytical account privileging 'desire', I will look to provide an account of the affective grounds for belief in community, nation, and culture.

Third, Intercommunal Studies

focuses on the way, whether implicit and unconsciously asserting itself or explicit and actively pursued, that desire for communality is necessarily intercommunal (v)

This analysis is central to Hage's various elaborations upon the theme of 'nation-building' (1993a, 1993b), particularly his understanding of the dialogic, sexualised sub-discourses of nationalism, in which the nation figures both as the feminised nurturing 'motherland', and, at the same time, as the masculinised,
aggressive 'fatherland'. This analysis greatly facilitates an understanding of the apparently oxymoronic simultaneous predications of a distinctly 'Australian Hip Hop Nation' and a transnational, global Hip Hop Nation. Additionally, I have already shown that within the scene, the co-presence of other 'communities' was acknowledged, accompanied by discourses of 'tolerance', 'respect', and regard for the 'right of self-expression' identified by Hage (1993a; 1994). Significantly, however, Hip Hop marked its difference and superiority to these other communities by asserting a particular epistemological precedence. The other 'communities', including the 'mainstream' are held to be entitled to their beliefs and to express those beliefs, even though those beliefs are wrong. Only Hip Hop, with its access to 'The Street', 'Reality', Truth', can offer access to knowledge (see below, p236ff).

Finally, Intercommunal Studies addresses

the conditions of emergence of new forms of social identification and communal formation (v)

The Appaduraian analysis of global cultural flows goes a long way towards explicating these 'conditions of emergence'; I have suggested that the 'desire for communality' which Hage and Johnson foreground may be thought of in terms of such a 'condition of emergence'. The ideoscope within the context of which the practice of Hip Hop Communality unfolded generated, and naturalised, such a 'desire', inciting agents towards a discourse of community: processes of incitement 'understood' as 'desire'. I have, effectively, identified a contemporary (that is, historical, contingent) 'will to culture/community': a discursive terrain within which agents are encouraged towards, and rewarded for, in various ways, accounting for their lived (collective) experience in terms of these particular discourses.

Taking the last of these four principles of analysis first, I want to look at these 'conditions of emergence' in more detail, considering the cultural context within which an incitement to discourses of 'community' are discernible. I will then look at the centrality of
ideas about 'community' in academic analysis of popular music before returning to the ethnographic material in order to look more closely at the "internal struggles for the very creation of, and the right to speak in the name of, 'the community'".

**Conditions of Emergence: Popular discourses of 'Community'**

One of the 'conditions for emergence' of the Hip Hop scene was in fact, the ubiquity of discourses of community in the public sphere within which that scene was located. Ferdinand Tonnies, writing in the late Nineteenth Century, is generally recognised as the theorist who introduced the term to sociology, identifying *Gemeinschaft* with 'organic life', 'intimacy' and privacy. In this sense, 'community' designated "closely knit networks of people of a similar kind, with intimate relationships, with face-to-face relationships . . . [the community] was seen as serving the needs of its members with warmth, strength and stability" (Skrbis 1993: 8). The implicit discourses of authenticity and of consensual democratic politics that inform such an understanding are the very features that facilitate the taking up of the word itself by a range of individuals and groups. Writing in the 1950s, Hillery was able to list 94 definitions of the word 'community', concluding that "all of the definitions deal with people . . . beyond this common basis there is no agreement" (in Skrbis op cit). Skrbis accurately suggests that 'community' has become "a mythological construct in everyday language as well as in the scholarly literature" (8).

In a recent collection of essays and papers titled *Community in Australia*, Lucy Taksa has considered this ubiquity of use of the term 'community'. To the apparent dismay of anthropologists and sociologists, for whom, Taksa argues, the term loses any analytic specificity, 'community' is attached to any number of social groups and services. Thus, it is possible on any given day, to pick up a newspaper and read of "the Sydney Lesbian and Gay Community", "the Greek Community", "the Vietnamese Community", "the Arts
Community”, “the religious community” and so on. Taksa reads, in this discursive ubiquity

a romantic and positive orientation in regard to moral duties which supposedly arise out of shared ‘group interests’, shared identity, mutual support and so forth. (1994: 24)

Terms such as ‘community’ and ‘culture’ certainly have attached to them a certain cachet: values that are felt to accrue to practices that can claim to derive from such metaphysical substrates, practices that, otherwise might be felt to beg justification. To go out spray-painting train carriages late at night with a handful of friends, for example, is fun. It is illegal, clandestine, and therefore exciting. One might be chased by the police, get arrested, or escape, running all through the night, collapsing hours later after traversing a dozen kilometres of train lay-up yards, storm water channels, housing estates: a grand cops and robbers game played out (for real) across the re-invented graffiti-geographies of Sydney’s western suburbs, this a rhizomatic remapping of the city that traverses, overlays, under-passes the conventional radial-arboreal geography of freeway and railway corridor. To be a bomber is to be tough, to have a blast, to fight a guerilla action against a uniformed, or poorly, laughably inadequately disguised plain-clothed ‘transit’. And at the end of the night, there is a beer or a bong with your mates, and the possibility of seeing your piece, your ‘throw-up’, or at least a few dozen of your tags ‘running’ on the day’s commuter trains. Finally, as one writer told me, there are always the girls (“they love the bombers, man”).

Dozens of accounts testify to this; listen, for example, to the breathless raps of Def Wish Cast (“Perennial Cross-Swords’, the account of the eternal struggle between the writer and the transit police), or read the frankly exhilarating account of a ‘whole train’ piece by the legendary writer Lee of the 1970s New York based Fabulous Five in Craig Castleman’s Getting Up (1982: 2-17). Castleman’s transcription of Lee’s story is buoyant, intoxicating,
thrilling; almost (and significantly) required reading in graffiti circles.

How much better is all this if you can make a case that not only is it good fun, but it is part of a ‘culture’; if you are both ‘expressing’ yourself and ‘representing’ your community? What if you are able to justify these activities in terms of a discourse of rebellion, able to claim that you are fighting the powers that be? Even more: what if there is a researcher asking you about it? Studying you? You can push the affective side of it right out of sight . . . sure, it’s fun . . . but it’s more than that . . . “it’s a culture, man” . . . It is a vocation, a job. And it’s not only ‘speaking’ on behalf of your proto-community. It’s speaking for (variously) ‘youth’, ‘the west’, ‘the underground’, the dispossessed, the unvoiced, the oppressed.

This is all a big part of it, particularly when understood in this context: several of these people (remember, the Hip Hop sub-cultural elite) have been doing these things for a decade. They have police records, have spent time in prison. They have children, some are married. They have invested their entire adult life in these practices. They live, breath, sleep these things . . . they have a marked (this is too weak a term) interest in these activities meaning something. Their being is Hip Hop. Why ‘concede’, or admit, perhaps, that it is fun, when it can be more than that, when it can be everything?5

There was a contradictory tension within Hip Hop: the pervasive understanding within the scene that Hip Hop, as a ‘street’ ‘culture’, and as a world community is able to access otherwise occluded, dissembled, or otherwise inaccessible truths, is often accompanied by a kind of teleological, quasi-Attalian millenarian discourse, in which a developing musical form prefigures a future social order (Attali 1985). Ser Reck, for example, repeatedly asserted that “Hip Hop is the future”, arguing that there is a brewing apocalypse in the suburbs. In a less dramatic form, witness Def Wish Cast’s ecstatic assertion of the Australian Hip Hop’s imminent ascendancy upon the world (Hip Hop) stage:
At the same time, the local Hip Hop Scene did not really proselytise. Too much status was often at stake to allow the scene to become too inclusionary. Within the scene, agents sought a distinct communitarian identity, fundamentally ‘different’ to other co-existent communities. Here the use of the term ‘Hip Hop Culture’ is significant; many were aware of the use of the term ‘sub-culture’ to describe youth cultural activities, but did not use it as a label to be applied to their own practice and beliefs. Blaze, for example rejected the idea out of hand, claiming that Hip Hop is a culture in its own right, implicitly not ‘sub’-anything. ‘Members’ of the Hip Hop Community understood their communal being not as a hierarchically delimited subset of an over-arching public sphere. Insiders understood this culture as being more ‘counter-’ than ‘sub-’.

**Locating the Sydney Hip Hop Community**

Robert Walser has remarked upon the difficulties presented by ‘industrial societies’ to ethnographical methodologies, arguing that in such societies, “there is no single ‘local’ to be studied” (1995: 291). I have already noted that the Hip Hop ‘community’ in Sydney, even the Hip Hop ‘Nation’, Hip Hop ‘Culture’, did not ‘exist’ per se, and I certainly do not want to start off from a position which reifies such things from the outset. Cultures are not, of course, *a priori*, coherent wholes (Moore 1989: 38). This is not to be read as an assertion about a putative ‘post-modern condition’; rather, I take it that cultures never have been coherent, bounded entities, although it is important to note that some cultures are more coherent than others, and vice versa. Some cultures more effectively, or perhaps more ruthlessly, police cultural boundaries, regulating the traffic of cultural material.

Such ‘policings’ are social practices. Informed in part by the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, and as developed by Hage, I want to focus upon a “reality . . . still in the making”, with a view
to establishing a knowledge not of a social 'reality', but of the "knowledge of the making of [a] social reality", where this 'making' consists in "conflicting political struggles" (Hage 1995: 61). Hage's comments also include a cautionary note, advocating a vigilance against the scholarly desire to resolve disputes in order to establish 'reality'. My own desire, for example, is not to weigh against each other the arguments of J.U. and Mick E., or to produce an account evaluating the relative 'truth' of various claims to 'authenticity' or otherwise.

Indeed, in empirical terms the Sydney 'Hip Hop Community' was rarely, if ever, experienced in its totality. It is hard to even put a number on its size; my inquiries along these lines were usually met with indirect responses suggestive of, perhaps, a desire not to admit the empirical fragility of the concept. This indeterminacy, this non-empirical status of the community had distinct advantages: it allowed any substantial gathering to claim that it 'was', or at least 'represented' the community. So, when crews from Brisbane 'went over' a number of pieces on the sea wall at Bondi Beach in late 1994, the gathering of writers that went back to the Beach a fortnight later to reclaim the wall space was able to name itself as 'the community'. This is suggestive Bauman and Briggs' work on the socio-political dimensions of genre (to which I will return below); work which stresses the power to exclude or exclude particular texts (moments of practice) through selective definition of genre boundaries, while maintaining the assumption that genres are stable, defined conceptual and practical spaces.

The main evidence, however, which I was offered to support the idea of the Hip Hop Community was an apparently unambiguous presence. A gathering, whether for a gig, or to piece, or to hang out, was offered to me as incontrovertible evidence: "here is the community," I would be told . . . our friends, these people sharing our ideas and values. A well-attended gig, or freestyle session constituted evidence of the 'strength' of the community. The ability to name people in the scene, in particular, demonstrated that the community existed. This is apparent in the 'shout-outs'
that would go to air whenever Miguel hosted rappers or crews on his weekly broadcast. "So many, so many" muttered one DJ as he attempted to not omit anyone in the scene; to miss out somebody's name was a cardinal sin, liable to be interpreted as a diss. This 'namechecking', as I have suggested, was the aural, electronic counterpart to the graffiti practice of 'tagging': the covering of any available surface with one's tag, creating a set of constantly updated traces of self across the suburban rail network. These naming practices, whether in spraypaint, over the ether, on record covers or in magazines, I suggest, does not constitute, as the participants claim, a 'representing' of an existing 'community', but rather is the performative act of producing, of presenting, that constituency that it claims to represent. Graffiti, one writer told me as pieces flashed past outside the train window, is a "sign of life . . . I see it and I know that someone has been there". Writers 'know' each other through seeing each others' tags, before they meet. The shared practice, however, is taken as evidence of a shared being.

The predication of a community involved, then, an assumption, rather than an experience, of sameness. On a social organisational level, graffiti writers 'hang out' in 'crews', or 'posses' (not gangs). These terms were taken directly from the Hip Hop mediascape: a crew is simply a group that might have gone to school together, lived in relative proximity, hangs out in the same place. As crews came into contact with other crews there was a certain degree of inter-affiliation: writers from different crews might join up to tag or piece together. In the Sydney graffiti scene, there was little violent rivalry, although there was always a degree of braggadocio, and reminiscing about the great inter-crew battles of the old days. Crews tended to be semi-formalised and governed in their internal and external relationships by discourses of 'respect'. Transgressions; 'going over', 'dissing' and so on; were dealt with by ostracism, perhaps 'small scale' violence (fist fights and pushing and shoving: I came across no evidence for the use of knifes, firearms, or other weaponry), and attempts to resolve disputes.
through the invocation of 'appropriate ritual': J.U. and Mick E's battle.

And yet, such moments as the gathering of a number of writers and crews at a given site constitute very powerful affective grounds for claims to 'community'. As does, for example, a show: a night at an inner-city bar with all the "west-side posses" in attendance, pogo-ing to Def Wish Cast, having made a sixty kilometre journey from the far western suburbs for the occasion, clearly demonstrates, or is taken to demonstrate, a shared experience, a shared desire to be part of something.

The Sydney Hip Hop Scene

In ethnographic terms, then, what I witnessed over a period of two and a half years was a number of people, mostly young adult and late teenage boys, from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, participating in a number of activities. These activities included listening to 'rap' music, talking about rap music, judging rap music, rapping, making 'beats' and recording their raps, improvising raps, writing raps, performing raps, DJing, painting graffiti, sometimes legally, or on commission, often illegally; looking at pictures of graffiti, hanging out with each other, in their parents' homes, less often in their own homes; occasionally break-dancing, practising breaking moves; smoking dope, reading magazines, drinking, stealing spray paint, going to work, going to school, watching videos, raising their children.

They dressed and wore their hair if not similarly, if not, to an outsider, immediately identifiably, then at least in response to and consistently with an ever-shifting, negotiated, but shared sensibility: that which has been labelled in sub-cultural studies, since the pioneering days of Hebdige (1979) and, before that, Melly (1971), a style. It is more useful, for my purposes, to think about 'style' in terms of what Bourdieu calls habitus. For Bourdieu, a habitus is "a set of historical relations 'deposited' within
individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action" (Wacquant in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16). Habitus can only be thought in terms of its relationship with a given 'field', a set of objective forces which "refracts external forces according to its internal structure" (Wacquant 17). Earlier, I have demonstrated the complex relationships between various dimensions of the 'mediascape' informing the Hip Hop scene. Importantly, however, Bourdieu understands a field as a space of "conflict and competition" (ibid): while the 'field' of Sydney Hip Hop is informed by, obviously, the clothes and styles seen in American (Hip Hop) magazines, on rap music video clips, micro-political determined factors are just as significant in shaping the Hip Hop habitus: idiosyncratic eccentricities created short-lived fetishes—a father's golfing cap, a shaved head.

The social agents of the scene shared a language, a critical vocabulary, a set of aesthetic values and embodiments—related to, or consistent with, at any given time, the consensual set of interpretations of these 'Hip Hop' practices. None of these, of course, was fixed: words floated in and out of circulation, aesthetic standards were negotiated. Force of character (or something like that) could impose or delete a set of preferences as power, or access to sub-cultural capital was exchanged, accrued, resisted. They shared a folk history, a set of knowledges about the 'origins' of these practices in far-off places, and about their local manifestation over a period of a decade (a long time indeed, both for the young men involved, and for a nation of barely two centuries' standing).

A number of the people engaged in these activities and by these discourses were concerned to offer an account of these activities in which certain key terms recurred. What they were doing, these particular people suggested in their discussions with me, with each other, in the articles they published in small-circulation but broadly distributed magazines, in the course of radio broadcasts, in their raps, in their addresses to the audience between raps, on
their album covers, on their cassette and compact disc inserts, in interviews; in short, in any forum to which they gained access, was participating in a ‘culture’: specifically, something called Hip Hop Culture. To participate in one of these activities, and especially in one of the three central practices; rapping, writing or breaking, was, in the frequently used expression circulating in the scene, to ‘represent’ this culture.

Their participation together in this culture constituted, these social agents claimed, what they called ‘The Hip Hop Community’. This Community was qualified variously as ‘The Sydney’ Hip Hop Community, the ‘Australian’ Hip Hop Community, and in its broadest form, simply ‘The’ Hip Hop Community, a transnational community of like-minded folk also commonly referred to as ‘The Hip Hop Nation’.

Not everybody who rapped, who wrote (graffiti), who break-danced, DJed and so on subscribed to these discourses. For many, graffiti writing was unrelated to anything called Hip Hop Culture. They did not understand themselves as participating in a ‘Hip Hop Community’. They hung out with their friends. They wore shell tops, Adidas runners, hooded jackets, baseball caps, baggy jeans, sharp dos. Called themselves ‘homies’, or ‘homeboys’. Listened to rap, R’n’B, new jack swing. Listened to techno, perhaps. Used the argot. Smoked dope. Threatened passers-by. Acted tough. Provoked letters to the editor and tut-tutting feature articles in the daily press. Went to school, didn’t let their parents know where they were, and so on. As rapper The Sleeping Monk explained to interviewer Miguel d’Souza:

Miguel: [when you see kids] wearing hi-tops and that... does that all mean that all of them are into rap?

The Monk: Hah. They see the image on their TV shows and they see the image. Basically, to be cool, like back in the days when I was at school you know it’s like you had to wear the freshest stuff and like, you’d wear your Starter cap and your sneakers and that and people say ‘yeah, that’s cool’; that’s what
they see in the magazines, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that . . . I used to go up to kids at school who you know perceive themselves to be b-boys would ask them questions and they wouldn’t have a fucking clue about what they were doing (d’Souza 1994).

We will see more of the figure of the ‘half-stepper’; that person adopting the ‘appearance’ of a ‘true’ Hip Hop aficionado without ‘committing’ themselves to ‘the culture’. The ‘homie’ emerged throughout the 1990s in Australia as a broad-brush label for anyone adopting what insiders saw as the superficial trappings of Hip Hop style. My concern is, however, with those individuals for whom it was, for whatever reason, of critical importance to subsume those (Hip Hop) practices, those habituses, to these narratives of community, culture and nation. Those who did, in The Monk’s phrase, “have a fucking clue about what they were doing”. It is the sense of purpose, of project, implicit in The Monk’s explanation that interests me most. I will focus on the specific struggles of those various individuals and groups engaged in these processes of, perhaps, making something out of these things, these practices and beliefs. ‘Various’, because, as I have already shown, such processes of subsumption, or, as I will suggest, reification, which ultimately involve the (strategic) fixing (suturing) of semiotic relationships within and across the field of social being and meaning, are always agonistic, if not antagonistic. These are ‘semiotic’ relationships, because they involve strategically constructing, in the mode of belief, relationships of apparent necessity between various signifiers and signifying practices, a mode of belief which motivates, and is, perhaps, exhausted by, Vame’s statement above: ‘anything for Hip Hop’ (p37). In Peircian terms, and after Feld, I argue that the construction of ‘iconicities of styles’ across and between disparate, and independently genealogisable practices constitutes, within the systems of belief under consideration, a logic of representational necessity, whereby practice is constituted as evidence of a precedent cultural essence.
The efforts of a number of individuals were directed towards the articulation to specific practices and genres of specific, and putatively necessary, values. These values were then adduced as being, or having a being prior to, and causally, structurally, determinant of, those practices. Relationships of analogy were ‘read’ as relationships implying a strict homology: the practice of those practices, then, within the logic of the scene, was understood as ‘representation’ of those ontologically pre-cedent values. The indeterminacy of just what is being represented (the term used within the scene) is critical for the success of a strategic process of semiotic closure. The positing of a transcendent, intangible cultural essence (“the ideology of Hip Hop”, or simply “Hip Hop”) constituted an horizon of investigation, a limit which could not be demonstrated, but which was referred to in quasi-theological terms. It was articulated to aesthetic judgements which defy a rigorous formal analysis, precisely because, within a global economy in which any sound, practice, gesture or habitus can be commodified, it is critical to be able to strategically shift generic boundaries. Thus, ‘hard core’, a key aesthetic term applicable to a beat, a tagging practice, a break-dance performance, or to describe someone’s attitude, resists specific analysis: it changes over time, encompassing whatever the community of investigators negotiates as appropriate in the given context. Madonna’s various appropriations of hard core sounds are kept ‘outside’, even though they might be musicologically indistinguishable from a hard core track. Even the educated ear cannot effect the distinction without an intimate knowledge of the current state of play in the scene. Apparent homologies—structurally determined necessary expressive modes—are revealed as carefully negotiated, contestable consenses.

Absolutely central to Hip Hop as it ‘emerged’ and developed in inner-urban North America is a discourse of place (Decker 1993). Rappers come from a place, a ‘hood’ that is named, which they claim to represent. The majority of rap or Hip Hop albums will have at least a passing reference to the geographic point of origin of the performer: NWA’s “Straight Outta Compton” literally put
that Los Angeles district on the map. I shall elaborate on the locating of Sydney Hip Hop's 'home' below: here I want to point to the proliferation, in the Sydney scene, of a number of geographical sites from which rappers and writers project their being, creating a local Hip Hop geographies, a topographical grounding of the carefully cast net of shout-outs and tags in constant motion across the length and breadth of Greater Sydney. To trace these names back to specific local referents ("the West Side", "the Kensington boys", "the inner west posses" and so on) effectively populates the entire area with 'Hip Hop'.

This is one of the most distinctive features of the Sydney Hip Hop scene, a feature which is responsible for the massive effort put into the discursive production of the 'Hip Hop Community'. This feature is simply the geographical dispersal across such a vast area of those making a claim to Hip Hop in this city. A massively sprawling city, Sydney lacks the dense inner-city 'hoods' of Hip Hop folklore. The city centre is a grid of tower blocks and a handful of entertainment precincts; people live in the suburbs, tens of kilometres distant. Sydney Hip Hop is decidedly, assertively and proudly, suburban. Crews 'operate' (that is, 'hang out') in isolation, encountering each other through the traces of tags, at (very) occasional Hip Hop nights at clubs, or not at all. Hence the pressure to tag up as often as possible: otherwise one is, literally, invisible. Crews, which are, after all, only a small group of friends hanging out together, rather than gangs 'claiming territory' or marking out turf possessively, get their tags up whenever and wherever possible. Tagging itself is a reason for a trip to the city, or for an afternoon 'bombing' expedition around the rail network. An absent member of the crew will sometimes have their tag, or an interpretation of it, put up.

The point is that there was, in Sydney, no Hip Hop Community that 'simply' was. If not for the constant effort of generating the 'representation' of this community, it would not be found at all. All that would remain would be clutches of individuals hanging out together, leaving graffiti for . . . well, for no-one, really. The idea of
the Hip Hop Community, somehow unifying these disparate groups lends these practices meaning, renders them coherent. Further, in rendering the 'Community' thinkable, this 'idea' holds out the promise of a possible, future, union: the Hip Hop Community is an idea suspended between a halcyonic past and a deferred future (re-)completion.

**Community as Genre of Social Being**

Drawing upon the foundational work of Hymes and Hanks, Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman (1992) argue that genres are the historical products of situational factors. I want to extend this argument to help to tease out the notions of community being deployed within the Hip Hop scene, to suggest that the naming of a set of social practices as 'community' is an operation analogous to the determination of texts or practices as genres. An attempt to "delineate the fixed, integrated features" (Lewis 1995: 222) constituting the Hip Hop Community, or even 'Hip Hop' will be doomed to fail, for exactly the same reasons that Briggs and Bauman (and Lewis 1995) argue that similar attempts to fix generic categories will fail.

Hanks defines genre as "the historically specific conventions according to which authors [in Bakhtin's sense of authorship as the production of utterances] compose discourse and audiences receive it". In this view, genres consist of orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations that are not part of discourse structure, but of the ways actors relate to and use language" (1987: 670). Moving away from a natural science model of genre as taxonomic category, in which genres 'exist' in mutual exclusion, Hanks foregrounds the historicity of, and therefore the transitory, shifting nature of, genres. Genres, on this account, are leaky, interpenetrating, overlapping.

Briggs and Bauman advocate a methodological approach which stresses "the elements of disjunction, ambiguity and general lack
of fit that lurk around the margins of generic categories, systems and texts” (145). There is always, they argue, a ‘gap’ which manifests between any given text and the generic context within which the text is produced. This gap is the site of strategic intervention: to minimise this gap is to suggest that genres are perfect categories; to maximise the gap is to draw attention to it. Minimising the emphasis on gaps between genres renders the discourse maximally interpretable. That is, a kind of generic hegemony is extended over the text (utterance, performance, discourse), sustaining of conservative authority. The textual moment is established as adhering to textual precedents. Alternatively, conceding that a given text overflows, supplements or otherwise exceeds the existing ‘genres’ is to establish the possibility of resisting blocs of institutionalised meanings.

“Invocations of genre”, Briggs and Bauman argue, provide powerful strategies for building what Anderson terms ‘imagined communities’ " (150). Indeed, this is the case not only on the scale of national imaginaries, but for, as I am arguing, any dimension of communality. This thematisation of a ‘gap’ within which meaning, and therefore, the mode of social organisation, is momentarily ‘up for grabs’, or subject to renegotiation, is evident in Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the hiatus between the ‘pedagogic’ and the ‘performative’ moments of the constitution of nationalism. It is this moment of suspension, Bhabha suggests, which is ‘papered over’ by the narration of nation. I will argue that exactly this process will be rendered visible in the processes of the construction of the Hip Hop Community as I observed it. The effort of the cultural elite, who have invested an interest in the maintenance of a generic/communal status quo must be directed, such models suggest, towards the minimisation of these ‘gaps’, these spaces which allow reinterpretation.

Genre, then, for Briggs and Bauman, is intertextual, much as discourse is within the Bakhtinian model, evidencing the complex and contradictory relationship of genre to discourse. Genre creates intertextual relationships between texts which at once serve to
order them, and to render them ambiguous, open-ended, both synchronically and diachronically. By extending these observations to the question of the creation and maintenance of 'communities', I similarly want to stress, alongside the question of agency and strategy, that of diachrony; the determination of generic or communal boundaries over time, in the context of the strategic interventions of agents not necessarily acting in a Goffman-like self-presence, but themselves located within a history, and operating in the mode of belief. To summarise, on this account, structure, form, meaning are not immanent in discourse, but are products of ongoing processes; and these processes are not centred in the speech act, but in its interface with at least one other utterance.

Discourses of Community as Strategy

In addition to her review of the ubiquity of the use the term in academic and popular discourse, Taksa notes that 'community' "tends to be used in such a way that suggests a totality" (1994: 24): a consensus of opinion, implicit in the discourse of organicity around which 'community' is constructed and elaborated as a mode of socio-political organisation.

At the same time, Taksa points out:

The denial of internal differences implicit in the word [community] ... can have fundamental socio-political ramifications (24)

Extending Taksa's cautionary conclusion, that "a community is not a static thing" (25), Zlatko Skrbis, echoing Walser's observation, warns against the potential methodological pitfalls of an approach predicated upon an a priori concept of 'community': "research," he argues, "shows that in reality it is very hard to locate an ethnic community" (1994: 10). Skrbis' work is concerned with what he calls 'community labelling'; the processes by which a discourse of 'community' is mobilised by an elite. He models
community-making as the product of strategies of exclusion and inclusion, through which the ‘community’ elite effect ‘multiple fluctuations of boundaries’ in order to discipline the segmented, contested space of the proto-community. Not everyone is immediately included within the community boundary, notwithstanding their ethnic, religious, class, sexual, gender (and so on) status. Rather, inclusion is determined in relation to situational factors. whoever is able to legislate upon the fluctuating rules of inclusion or exclusion is thereby able to determine who or what is the community.

Of course, from the ‘outside’, Skrbis argues, the space of the community appears to be uniform. The sociological and by now, popular understanding of the term ‘community’ implies an a priori homogeneity, in the context of which difference appears as an anomaly; as evidence, more often than not, of the ‘inauthenticity’ of the group claiming the status of community. I would add that this appearance of homogeneity is precisely what is at stake in making claims to ‘community’. The refusal of the Hip Hop Scene to conform to homogeneity in its empirical, lived dimension, as I have shown, constituted a constant theme of discourse within the scene, evidenced, for example by the constant calls to unification, the lamenting of those who wish to divide the scene. Hage elaborates this theme in the context of nationalism, writing that the nationalist dream of homogeneity is an impossible project; and that further, this impossibility of its own project structures nationalism itself (1993a). A similar incompleteness structures the experience of the Hip Hop Scene in Sydney. It is a project whose completion is constantly deferred both temporally, and, perhaps concomitantly, ‘ideologically’. Witness the implicit eschatology of Hip Hop discourse: Australian Hip Hop is, in Def Wish Cast’s words ‘Comin’, but not yet completely ‘up’; Hip Hop was repeatedly described to me as being ‘the future’; Unique/Ser Reck is convinced that a kind of scaled-down apocalypse of the Western Suburbs is imminent. ‘Struggle’ is thematised as the fundamental ‘being’ of the ‘culture’, as it fights to resist dilution, appropriation, commercialisation, and so forth. Discourses of authenticity,
couched in both arguments about lineage, as I have argued, or just as frequently, about lived experience, the affective, phenomenological dimensions of ‘living and breathing’ the culture (Blaze, Absolute Zero), of being ‘true to the music’ (Def Wish Cast). The latter discourse often takes the form of the sub-discourses of self-expression, the right to a voice, the undeniably immediate sensation of rapping, writing, breaking and so on. Such discourses frequently rely upon a predication of the embodied experience of music (particularly, of course, Hip Hop, with its deep, corporeal beats) as being unmediated, as immanent and immediate. All these discourses are produced, circulated, enlisted to the ‘struggle’.

By ‘ideological deferral’, I refer to the mimetic economy of representation by which, as I argue, Hip Hop practices are held to ‘represent’ an essential Hip Hop Cultural ‘being’, or essence (‘ideology’, as I have noted, is a term used within the scene to describe this level of meaning operating to guarantee the overall coherence of ‘Hip Hop’ as a ‘culture’). The example that I used earlier to illustrate this, and to which I again want to refer to support my argument here for the operation of a logic of deferment within the discourse of the scene, is the article in Hype, entitled “the nameless language” (above, p158). Recall: this article concerned the impossibility of naming Hip Hop “for it has no limits but the state of mind of the creator”; to name it is to limit it; to know more about it is to realise the impossibility of naming it, and so on. The argument that I am using owes a debt to Derrida, who long ago (1976) argued for the impossibility of grounding any chain of signification in an absolute, transcendent signified. It is this impossibility, I suggest, that is being worked through in the article I refer to here: Hip Hop qua essence cannot be demonstrated, cannot be named; it can only be experienced through a mode of embodied activity: the flow of the freestyler, the ex-static investment of self in the action of writing one’s name in spraypaint on a wall, putting a needle on a record (“it’ll take you there”).

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As Lewis (1995) argues, however, there is a convincing alternative to the binary logic against which Derrida was polemicising, and here again I have recourse to Peircian semiotics. Lewis’ contention is that Derrida did not push his engagement with Peirce far enough (Derrida 1976: 48-49). Once again, I shall myself defer my own discussion of Peirce, remarking here only that for Peirce, the coherence of a system of belief or knowledge is determined by the predication, in the production of that belief or knowledge by a ‘community of investigators’, of a future (deferred) consensus of belief/knowledge. And herein is a useful way in and with which to think ‘community’.

Skrbis’ point is that all claims to community are predicated precisely upon a set of micropolitical circumstances, dependant upon an existing hierarchy, or elite, but also upon “loyalties, interests, envy, gossip, scandals and demands that take place within a group at any given moment” (1994: 11). He offers a generic experience from his fieldwork (he was researching Slovenian and Croatian ‘communities’ in South Australia at the time of the Balkan wars of the early 1990s), an experience which I shared on many occasions:

While conducting my fieldwork, I was told by individuals from ‘both sides’ that ‘their’ particular arguments were the right ones. When I commented, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that’ or ‘I am surprised to hear that’, I was openly told that this was so because I did not frequent their (correct) side of the community (11).

I think here of the ‘battle’ between J.U. and Mick E, and the subsequent concern on the part of both parties to set the matter straight in my mind. Weeks later, J.U. was to tell me that he was glad that “now you’ve seen the real thing”, after hanging around the Lounge Room crews for a while.

Skrbis uses the word ‘hierarchy’ to designate a social elite, arguing that this need not designate a fixed structuring of power relations in which power is a quality held by some (the powerful, the ‘elite’) and not by others (the ‘subjects’, perhaps). Rather, following
Foucault, and as Skrbis suggests, power circulates within and around a given context, informing, being exchanged within, producing and disciplining every moment of discourse; gossip as well as 'official' discourse. It is these permeative qualities of power; its ubiquity, elusiveness, supplementarity, its tendency to overflow, to be generative, those aspects of power rendered in the French as _pouvoir_; that inform the exertion of disciplinary power (_puissance_). The formation of a 'hierarchy', such as that I observed in the Sydney Hip Hop scene, requires that the ubiquity of 'puissance' be somehow disciplined into regulatory discourses. In order for such discourses to have an effect, however, requires that those to be subjected to them are 'enrolled' within a particular closure of what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call the 'field of articulation'.

Stewart Clegg borrows the term 'enrolment' from Callon's "empirical sociology of power" (1989: 204). Callon's model neither reduces action to the intentions of fully self-aware agents, nor to the effects of a structure, thus negotiating both 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist' accounts of social practice in a manner somewhat similar to that advocated by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant: 1992: 11). Callon (and Clegg) suggest that "networks of interest are actually constituted and reproduced through conscious strategies and unwitting practices" (ibid). The schema Callon employs to analyse such processes seeks to "map how agents actually do 'translate' phenomena into resources, and resources into organisation networks of control, of alliance, of coalition, of antagonism, of interest and of structure" (ibid).

This amounts to suggesting that for J.U. to establish his 'leadership' in the Hip Hop 'field' he does not merely have to 'beat' Mick E: he first has to establish that Mick E and himself are operating under a set of shared assumptions or understandings about what constitutes their 'field'. Only once Mick E has been so 'enrolled' does the battle have any 'meaning'. On this account, J.U. 'wins' by 'translating' the phenomenal resources at hand into 'networks of control' and so on, successfully "positing the indispensability of
[his] ‘solutions’ for ([his] definition of) the other’s [Mick E’s] ‘problems’” (Clegg *ibid*). In other words, as soon as J.U. convinces Mick E that he (Mick E) should battle J.U. in order to solve the problem of Mick E’s transgression, then J.U.’s ‘worldview’, his fixing of what Laclau and Mouffe call ‘nodal points of discourse’, *effectively* (and the stress here is important, for we are not dealing with questions of what *is*, but with questions of what is *acted upon*) establishes, no matter how contingently or fleetingly, the social reality within which these agents are able to act.

Bourdieu argues a similar point:

> The symbolic efficacy of words is exercised only in so far as the person subjected to it recognizes the person who exercises it as authorized to do so, or, what amounts to the same thing, only in so far as he fails to recognize that in submitting to it, he himself has contributed, through his recognition, to its establishment (1991: 116)

It is possible to substitute the word “practice” for “words” in this passage, to arrive at a reading of the battle’ between J.U. and Mick E. The symbolic efficacy of the battle was exercised only in so far as Mick E recognised J.U.’s authority to subject him, Mick E, to it. Although he may well have been reluctant to cede to J.U. the status of someone he should have to ‘prove’ himself to (by battling), Mick E, in terms of Bourdieu’s argument contributed to the establishment of J.U.’s status. J.U.’s ‘victory’ in the battle as much concerned his success as establishing himself as someone who had to be battled, as an authority, as in actually ‘winning’ the battle.

In considering what he calls “the mechanics of the presentation of the national self”, Hage uses Goffman’s 1959 analysis of the double space of the performance of group identity. Refracting Goffman’s Durkheimian analytic of the sui generis ‘team’ through a Bourdieuan concern with symbolic politics, Hage argues that ‘nations’ must be understood within “relations of power that give certain groups the possibility of simultaneously representing, constructing and most importantly . . . staging the nation” (1993: 126). The space for such an analysis of nation-(or collective-) building as being determined by power relations between groups within teams is opened up by Goffman’s observation that there are two dimensions of performance of identity: the ‘front’ space, where fostered impressions are played out; and the ‘back’ region, which is understood not only as the place where less than favourable aspects might be hidden or suppressed, but the place where “illusions and impressions are openly constructed” (Goffman in Hage, 127). The discourse of the Hip Hop Community, I suggest, is commensurable with the ‘front’ space of the performance of identity, a discourse produced and mobilised within the ‘back space’ of power relations, contestation bestowing upon the emergent ‘elite’, in Hage’s words, “the possibility of simultaneously representing, constructing and most importantly . . . staging the [Hip Hop] nation”.

Although my analysis has, following the Intercommunal Studies schema, enjoyed a conflation of the various discourses of communality, I do want to address the specificity of the Hip Hop discourses of Nationalism. The genealogy of these discourses can be found in the early decades of this century; the nascent ‘ideology’ of the Nation of Islam, and the (strategic) construction of an absolute racial identity and the subsequent slippage of the term ‘Nation’ into what Gilroy has called the ‘pedagogic’ rap of crews such as KRS One, X Clan and the Poor Righteous Teachers, and the “ludic Africentrism” of other crews such as the Jungle
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

Brothers and De La Soul (Gilroy 1993: 84-5). My main goal, however, is to understand how and why the discourse of Nationalism operates in the Hip Hop Scene that I observed. In one respect, this is a matter of ‘translation’: the processes by which a set of discourses is moved from one specific situation to another. In another, as in the matter of ‘community’, it is also a question of realpolitik: the deployment of a strategically useful discourse in order to secure a particular status, or power both within a given field, and for that field in the context of a larger public sphere. The strategic value of a given discourse, and the articulation of that discourse to practice, then, will be determined by the value of that discourse within that broader context: those external conditions which impose upon all agents and objects that fall within its scope particular values and ‘gravity’ (Wacquant in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17). Put simply, the discourse of ‘nation’ is both a useful one, and one which imposes its own logic, within the context of a broad public sphere in which such significance is attached to nationalism.

In Australia, the discourse of Hip Hop Nationalism resonated (and continues to resonate) with a generalised concern with (and a de facto state ideology of) questions of national identity, with republicanism, and the negotiation of a national post-colonial status, involving sub-discourses of multiculturalism and tolerance; fertile ground for the affectively appealing discourses of Hip Hop Nationalism.

This context, and the disjunction and discontinuity between it and the North American urban experience is productive of the specificity of the oxymoronic identity known as the Australian Hip Hop Nation, to which the title of this chapter refers. The Black Nationalist tropes (“external forces”—Wacquant 17) were “refracted” through the “internal structure” of Australian nationalist discourses, resulting in a moment of discursive and cultural syncretism, resolved in terms of a ‘both/and’, rather than an ‘either/or’, relationship, offering a concrete example of what
Hage has referred to as the fundamentally dialogic structure of all nationalisms.

While it certainly is the case that the discourse of Hip Hop Nationhood tended to figure most frequently in the more institutionalised texts that circulated within the scene—Vapors, Hype, Miguel’s weekly column and broadcasts, and in accounts offered to me as a researcher; that is to say, in more overtly, consciously ‘discursive’, textualised moments—no-one involved in the scene was unaware of the ‘Hip Hop Nation’ as a dominant, recurring trope for the Hip Hop social imaginary, nor of the import of such a trope for the positioning of their ‘Hip Hopness’. Further, it is also important to suggest that the use of such a trope needs to be informed by some grounding of that discourse in social agent’s lived experience: the labour of maintaining the viability of such discourses depends upon a dimension of experience which can be accounted for, by the social agents themselves, in terms of the discourse in question.

In the following sections, I want to start to unravel the complex entanglements of the nationalism to which the Hip Hop social agents are laying claim. This ‘nationalism’ is the heterogenous progeny of an overarching, global modernist incitement to nationalism that is amplified in the jingoistic Australian fin de siecle proto-republican ideoscape and the elaboration of a pan-African Islamicist nationalism, inflected strategically through the African-American experience, woven into the heart of the Hip Hop ‘standard narrative’. The ‘Nation’ emerges, in this cultural/discursive milieu, as an unproblematically ‘positive’ category, constituting both a grounds and an horizon for the thinking of collective and individual identity.

**Coming Under Notice**

According to Hage, at a particular stage of history, the nation “becomes the preeminent mode of collective being, where a
collectivity can no longer be if it is not formed into a nation”. He quotes Hegel’s observation of this status of ‘the nation’:

[i]n the history of the World, only those peoples can come under our notice which form a state . . . it must be understood that all the worth which the human being possesses—all the spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State (1993a: 77).

Hage elaborates on Hegel’s theme, suggesting that the question of ‘coming under notice’ is of “often forgotten” importance in nationalist thought. Above, I suggested that an idea about ‘community’ figures in contemporary discourse analogously to ‘the nation’ in these quoted passages; in the contemporary Australian public sphere, informed and circumscribed by (often contradictory and contested) state and popular discourses of multiculturalism and republicanism, ‘community’ can substitute for ‘nation’ in the above quoted passages. Thus, in the post-modern, post-colonial context, “only those peoples can come under our notice which form a community.”

‘Coming under notice’, Hage continues, involves questions of “presence, existence and direction” (77). It is also a matter of coming under the notice of an ‘us’; “our notice”: “there can be no nation [community] without a “community of nations [communities]” (78). In Hage’s schema, the becoming of the ‘Hip Hop Community’ would be seen as being predicated upon a certain desire to come under the notice of a meta-community of communities. The Hip Hop Community exists within an economy of other communities, and occupying, within that field, a privileged place, in that Hip Hop claims a specific, ‘authentic’ lineage, tradition, and so on.

Within a broader cultural context, one in which, as Hamilton observes, the problem of distinguishing a national self exists as a virtually ubiquitous incitement to narrate one’s self as a national, Hip Hop Nationalism, along with other tropes of communal identity circulating in the scene, is precisely a response to lack of a “sense of national, ethnic, local, class or trade-specific” identity in
contemporary Australian urban culture, nourished by a seemingly ubiquitous incitement to particular ('multicultural', 'egalitarian', 'cosmopolitan') Australian nationalisms.

Fear of a Black Planet

Where, then, does the idea of the 'Hip Hop Nation' come from? In genealogical terms, one line of antecedents can be traced to the Afro-centric discourse of Nation of Islam ideologists such as Elijah Mohammed, Malcolm X, and more recently, Louis Farrakhan. Perkins (1991) argues that a familiarity with the racial doctrines expounded by these teachers is essential to an understanding Public Enemy's extraordinary 1990 album, *Fear of a Black Planet*. Drawing in part upon the monographs of the early 1970s pamphleteer Frances Cress Welsing, who argued that the (degenerate) white race actively oppressed non-Caucasians as a response to 'pigment envy', P.E.'s album was a high point, if not the culmination, of the 'message rap' Hip Hop sub-genre, a sub-genre traceable back to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (1982). Accounts of the Nation of Islam can be found throughout the academic and popularised accounts of Hip Hop (Fernando 1994: 119-152, and particularly 144-5 for a brief historical account of the development of the Nation of Islam; Rose 1993: 103, 118-119; Toop 130, 19012), and it is not my intention to go into specific history in any depth. It will suffice to note that by the early 1990s, 'message rap' had transmuted into what Paul Gilroy identified as one of the three emergent strains within Hip Hop: "Africentric" rap (1993: 85), which invoked lyrically, visually, temperamentally and discursively an appeal to a lost, benevolent, 'tribal' pan-Africanism as an alternative to both the more militant self-conscious racial pedagogy of rap drawing upon the redemptive power of Islam, and the "affirmative nihilism" (1993: 84) of the west coast gangsta rap of N.W.A., Ice Cube, Snoop Doggy Dog, Dr Dre *et al* (see Ro 1996)13.
Gilroy's analysis of the "radical utopianism" of the Africentric Hip Hop movement (exemplified by such artists as those constituting the Native Tongues Posse) is apposite to my concerns. He argues that in premising a pan-African nationalism based upon "pure ethnicity", it "corresponds to no actually existing black communities" (87). A famous piece of Hip Hop lore, recounted by Toop, concerns seminal figure Afrika Bambaataa, inspired by the fiery rhetoric of Malcolm X and the visible good works of the Nation of Islam, changing his name and forming his 'Zulu Nation'. Growing up, Bambaataa explained,

[t]here was no land called negroland. Everybody in America—when they came here knew what country they was from (in Toop 1991: 58)

The turning point was in the early 1960s:

The Zulu Nation. I got the idea when I seen this movie called Zulu which featured Michael Caine. It was showing how when the British came to take over the land of the Zulus how the Zulus fought to uphold their land. They were proud warriors . . . fought like warriors for a land which was theirs (in Toop 57; see also Fernando 1993: 6-7)

Once again, a cultural genealogy is predicated upon a mass mediated ur-moment, a moment serving as a catalyst for a subsequent labour of cultural production; in this instance, the genealogising of the contemporary African-American experience to an originary (mythical) pan-Africanism. Bambaataa was instrumental in forging a close practical and ideological link between the emerging Hip Hop scene in New York in the late 1970s and the Nation of Islam. With what in hindsight looks like rich irony, for example, he sampled grabs from the speeches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King over extended mixes of the particularly Aryan-in-appearance German proto-techno group Kraftwerk's 'Trans-Europe Express' (Toop 130). Subsequent generations of rappers and producers throughout the 1980s also drew upon the recorded speeches and rhetoric of the martyred
heroes of the 1960s, as well as iconographic visual material: KRS-One’s album from 1988, titled “By All Means Necessary” (this quote itself later appropriated by George Bush) reproduced the famous image of Malcolm X, gun in hand, peering through a curtain. Instead of the shirt-sleeved, pistol-toting X, in this version KRS-One wears a shell-top jacket bearing his crew’s logo (‘BDP’ for ‘Boogie Down Productions), a baseball cap and totes an uzi, the iconic signifier of the late 1980s urban gang-banger (Toop 196). The density of signification layered up even further four years later when Spike Lee staged the same moment in his film biography of Malcolm X. The repertoire of images builds up; a polydimensional chain of intertextuality in which ‘the original’, or ‘the real’ is, indeed, if you were to follow Baudrillard’s nostalgic post-modernism, ‘lost’, subsumed to a logic of hyper-reality and representation.14

While Gilroy’s tripartite typology of rap music (the ‘pedagogic’, the ‘affirmative’ and the ‘ludic’) suffers from the ongoing processes of sub-generic bifurcation and syncretic discontinuity over time, he points to a fundamental “looseness” in the use of the term “black nationalism”, arguing that the ontological essentialism of such discourses generates

overintegrated conceptions of pure and homogeneous culture which mean that black political struggles are construed as somehow automatically expressive of the national or ethnic differences with which they are associated (31).

The ‘nation’, on Gilroy’s analysis, stands as a fundamentally modernist trope deployed to provide a “supposedly authentic, natural, and stable ‘rooted’ identity” (30), one which “masks the arbitrariness of ... political choices” (31) with the decided advantage, Gilroy argues, of being able to subsume differences of class, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, age and political consciousness (32). A few pages later he refers to the lure of “those romantic conceptions of ‘race’, ‘people’ and ‘nation’” (34, emphasis added): the discourses of nationalism exert a mighty pull; enough, as
Benedict Anderson remarked in his seminal book (1991), to send tens of millions to their graves in its name.

This subsumption of difference to a powerful, seductive, affective and romanticised discourse of belongingness constitutes the appeal of discourses of Hip Hop nationalism to the local, Australian context. Overcoming the lack of an organic, 'neighbourhood' basis for the sustainable production of a discourse of 'community', local proponents of Hip Hop communality have recourse to the more abstract, inclusive, transcendent category of 'nation' in order to explain their togetherness.

The Australian Hip Hop Nation

Here is the oxymoron. Hip Hop in Australia is it once part of the global Hip Hop Nation, and at the same time, distinctly Australian. The inclusionary, outernationalist discourse of Hip Hop as global community and the distinguishing, competitive discourse of Hip Hop as subsumed to a geo-political (Australian) national identity are activated simultaneously. But not necessarily paradoxically, as I will suggest below.

Let's take a couple of sets of texts with a view to unpacking some of the complexities of the encounter of discourses of Australian nationalism with those of Hip Hop nationalism. The first will be some writing in Vapors, in which we can see the refraction of the Hip Hop nationalist tropes through the specifically local metaphorical structures of jingoistic Australian nationalism. Blaze, as editor, pushed quite didactically what he understood as 'the ideology' of the Hip Hop Nation, deploying this idea rhetorically as a 'call to arms' and constituting in his various texts and conversations a nationalist teleology: a Hip Hop 'project'. This is perhaps what Feld (1994) would call the 'up-town' version of Hip Hop Nationalism, or what could also be called, perhaps, allowing the nationalist metaphor to take root, the Hip Hop 'state ideology'. Taking the show 'downtown', Def Wish Cast’s celebration of
'Australian Hip Hop', the anthemic "A.U.S. Down Under Comin' Up(per)" offers what they would themselves describe as a less cluttered, if no less self-conscious, evocation of a distinctly 'Aussie' nationalism.

"Address to the Hip Hop Nation"

The Hip Hop Nation comprises many cities, built out of individuals, ideas, attitudes and beliefs . . . All have their place . . . All have equal status in the nation.

This is 'Fibular' writing in Vapors Issue 8 (1992). The operant understanding of nationhood here is that of the sovereign state as collection of sovereign individuals, each guaranteed fundamental equalities and rights. And when you examine these 'citizens' in order to see what they have in common, suggests Fibular, you notice that they

all are individuals whose personality shine through in their art. The collective is comprised of salient individual accomplishments . . .

The individuals are, almost without exception in these texts, men. Brothers, Brethren. Blaze, for example, in an article accompanying Fibular’s text warns that

Suckers are on the move & encroaching on the space that was once occupied by the Rap fraternity . . .

and suggests that the reader should

[h]elp your brother & he will help you.

Here, then, is a distinctly liberal-democratic post-enlightenment state, reminiscent perhaps of high school modern history accounts of, for example, the ‘rights of man’ as enshrined in the revolutionary and nation-building constitutions of the late Eighteenth Century. The discourses of society, the nation and culture are bound up here, inextricably, with those of ‘self-expression’ and ‘accomplishment’. These two key aspects of the
post-Enlightenment ideoscape manifested themselves, completely intact, within the rubric of the Hip Hop scene in Sydney, as horizons of human and social being: specifically, the idea that performance ("accomplishment", for Fibular) represented the (already existing, transcendent, or substratally essential) culture was fundamental to the scene. Simultaneously, one's practice or performance ("accomplishment" again) was a pure expression of self: to learn to rap is, for example, in Hip Hop terms, to lay claim to one's voice, a voice characteristically understood as being somehow denied; to write (graffiti) is to at once 'get [yourself] up', and to 'represent the culture/community/nation'.

Throughout his article, titled 'Address to the Hip Hop Nation', Fibular deploys an extended set of geo-political metaphors as he negotiates the problem of defining the boundaries of Hip Hop: "the real deal". Fibular's analysis proceeds by elimination. For starters, he suggests, we can be sure that Vanilla Ice and his like

. . . are certainly not within the geographical boundaries of the Hip Hop nation . . .

A series of discourses are conflated here in the course of a single paragraph: the geographical metaphor collapses into the mercantile metaphorics of the business page:

. . . nor does he [Vanilla Ice] even reside in its major trading partners . . .

. . . an image in which can be seen the echo of the contemporaneous economic discourse dominating the public sphere: the Australian Balance of Payments 'crisis' which dominated political and corporate discourse throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s. The economic metaphor gives way to a heimat image of the Nation as (homely, mothering) village (Hage 1993: 79-80): Vanilla Ice, Fibular continues,

wouldn't even trim the hedges in the Hip Hop village.

The geographical and mercantile imagery then comes together in a
full-blown geo-political discourse:

Vanilla Ice and his insulting counterparts reside within the boundaries of the Hip Hop Nation’s traditional enemies.

These enemies are possessed of a “moral economy” which can “only be described as third world”. The evidence for this? Well, Fibular continues, this “enemy status” has arisen out of a total disrespect and green-blooded, wanton thievery and mockery of the customs and tradition of the [Hip Hop] nation, which are held in the highest esteem by its patriotic inhabitants.

Here is an example of what Hage and Johnson understand as the fundamental ‘intercommunality’ of communalism: any community, any nation can only exist in the context of other nations. Fibular extends national status to the many other nations who trade regularly with it [the Hip Hop Nation], ... Rock and Roll ... Jazz ... Reggae.

But, of course, fundamental to nationalism is the understanding that one’s own nation is the ‘true’ nation: that it alone has a destiny towards which the national being is striving. Indeed, Hage argues, it is this striving which is the essence of the nation.

Nationalist discourse ... rarely refers to an existing achieved national order ... it is always referring to their non-existence while arguing at the same time for their necessity (1993a: 97)

Hage’s analysis, drawing upon Lacan and Heidegger, also offers an explanation for the repeated lamentation of ‘divisions’ within the Hip Hop scene, both throughout the pages of Hype and Vapors and in everyday conversation. The need for ‘unity’, the calls for ‘getting together’ and so on are suggestive of an ongoing process of the preparation of the ‘Nation’:

Nationalist discourse is above all a discourse articulated
to the practice of nation-building as an on-going process. *It loses its significance if this process achieves its aim and comes to an end* (97; emphasis added)

Here is an unedited text of Blaze’s editorial to this same issue of *Vapors*:

The Hip Hop Culture is like a participant sport. It needs team players to survive. And the Australian Hip Hop Nation needs those players. We need people that are active & dedicated to the culture for it to live. Mind you, it will live, no matter what! No matter how many obstacles are laid down in front of it. No matter how many fuckwits try to internally destroy it. No matter how, where, who, why, what! It will persevere through thick & thin . . . . We know that the Australian Music industry doesn’t give a shit about our culture. Does this worry us? No not any more. We have travelled their paths & have seen no future. So what is the solution to this problem? The answer is simple. YOU! You are the solution. We have too many back seat drivers & not enough people actually manning the wheels. **Unification & dedication is all we ask of you.** We can’t do this ourselves, we need your input. (*Vapors* Issue 8: 3)

The sporting/team metaphor eloquently encapsulates the dominant mode of thinking about Australian national identity in the contemporary Australian public sphere, a nice little example of the local refraction of the outernationalist discourses of Hip Hop nationalism.

Hage argues that the nationalist, of course, does not understand the impossibility of the completion of these processes; if they did, they would not undertake the project of nation-building (1993a: 99). In Blaze’s text, the possibility of (Hip Hop) national failure is dismissed as soon as it is articulated: “Mind you,” (you can almost hear Blaze bellowing, finger stretched out in a Kitcheneresque *I want you* gesture) “it will live, no matter what!”

In order to sustain the *possibility* of the nation, Hage argues, an ‘other’ must be found to maintain a logic of obstruction, thus
sparing the nationalist of the anxiety of the impossibility of the goal. This ‘other’ can be constituted, as above, by internal schisms (such as ‘the Battle’), or those who have lost the faith:

some people have turned their backs on a cultural form that prides itself on self-development & artistic expression instead of pill popping & allnight dancing.

In the example of Fibular’s text, this ‘other’ is constituted by

... a lot of impersonators ...

who,

... in light of ‘Raps’ new popularity ... are knocking on Hip Hips door and trying to get in with false IDs ...

Blaze (and others) call these ‘impersonators’ “halfsteppers” and perpetrators ... Usually the ones with the most expensive showy clothes are the disciples of falsehoods ... Halfsteppers who only dress & act as though they are down with the our cause.

While, on the other hand,

a true Hip Hop pupil is 100% loyal, not a weekend warrior or a partime purveyor.

Vanilla Ice, for example, is nothing more than

a return persona of the black and white minstrels ... a white man donning a black mask—where white audiences could ‘legitimately’ identify with the pathos of a black character, while being distanced from real blacks.

So the question of ‘blackness” makes an appearance. Obviously, for the predominantly white Sydney Hip Hop scene16, this blackness needs to be negotiated. For Fibular, the problem is simply this: how can Vanilla Ice, a caucasian impersonating a black man, be excluded from the Hip Hop Nation, without this also disqualifying Fibular, presumably also white, from citizenship? The solution is to
identify an authenticity deriving not from colour or race, but from a notion of truthfulness to one’s self. It turns out that it is okay to be white and into Hip Hop as long as you don’t misrepresent who you are, as long as you do not simulate blackness: this, it seems, is where Vanilla Ice goes horribly wrong. In pretending to be black, in claiming a ‘street/black’ history which he apparently fabricated, he is not being ‘true’ to his ‘self’.

Once again, this discourse of truth to self, bound up with that of self-expression, emerges as a powerful horizon of analysis. ‘Selves’ are simply givens, retrievable and expressible: the nation is a collection of these individual sovereignties, and knowledge, as I will suggest below, is something which can both reveal the truth about those selves, and is simultaneously predicated upon them: the truth is something which the rational, clear thinking individual will be able to apprehend through the application of common sense, as Blaze suggested.

Corollary to these discourses (and to those of tolerance: Hip Hop is “probably the most accepting racially diverse culture that exists today”, writes Blaze) was the notion of respect. Respect was due to those who were true to themselves. I was accorded respect, for example, because I didn’t pretend to be anything other than a research student investigating a cultural phenomenon. Respect is always reciprocal, of course: it was incumbent upon me to demonstrate my good faith, to respect the scene myself.

Fibular, in elaborating these ideas, deploys two key tropes: “masking”, as used in the excerpt about the minstrels above, and “naturalness”. The media, and popular perceptions of rap and blackness are also culpable, in the eyes of Fibular, as once again he confronts the problems of “half-steppers” and “weekend warriors”:

> The libelous actions of these pseudo street artists, are adaptations of a painfully stereotypes view of rap, which lacks any soul or heart and the casual naturalness which is really the only ingredient necessary in Hip Hop.

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So, it is not the ‘blackness’ of African-American Hip Hoppers that constitutes their authenticity; it is their ‘naturalness’. Therefore, to be white and into Hip Hop is fine, so long as you, too, are “natural”.

Fernando’s account of the development from ‘Nation of Islam’ ideology of Hip Hop Nationalism is framed by ethnographic material taken from one Kam, a Los Angelino rapper and “gangbanger turned Muslim”. Kam supports Fibular and Ser Reck’s hypotheses, by completely displacing colour from the discourse:

it [The Nation of Islam]’s not about white this or white that . . . It’s not about skin color, it’s about the mentality behind the skin colour.

It is about being oppressed, he continues:

We victims, you know . . . 438 years of slavery . . . we the victims of all this.

So there’s one way of forging a shared citizenship, a shared nationality: the nation is constituted by the shared struggle of social agents to maintain the specific enjoyment of their being in the face of those (others) who want to take it away from them (Zizek 1994): witness Blaze’s utopian imagining of the harmony that is so close, yet denied by the “Racism/sexism/culturism/ageism/homophobia” of our “slipping society” (see p237, below), or the laying of claim to a ‘voice’ characteristic of accounts of the development of rap in the United States. The members of the Hip Hop Nation are bound by this contingency: an implied identity of an essential idea about oppression, able to be abstracted from its specific circumstances, its realpolitik.

Much effort, then, must be expended in demonstrating an ‘oppression’, and therefore an oppressor, against which this claim to national identity (with the African American) can be constructed. In claiming a specific oppression, or status as a victim (of sorts), the Sydney Hip Hopper is able to authenticate their claim to Hip Hop nationality. I shall return to this below, in looking at the discursive construction of the Sydney Hip Hop scene as
expressive superstructure within a logic of socio-economic determinism: the construction of ‘the West Side’ as the ‘home’ of Sydney Hip Hop.

Here, though, Blaze and Fibular offer an alternative account (it is perhaps useful to note that Blaze himself came from a relatively affluent background on Sydney’s Lower North Shore: for him, a reduction of oppression to a simple logic of class was not a credible option). For these writers, belongingness to the Hip Hop Nation needed to be predicated upon a more abstract, and more generalised model of oppression, in which you need not necessarily belong to a marginalised class, race, gender, sexuality, creed and so on. In fact, Blaze suggests, Hip Hop is “probably the most accepting racially diverse culture that exists today.” Emerging from this account is the idea that the Hip Hop Nation is actually the ‘true’ trustee of enlightenment values: there is no radical critique in all this of those values; only the assertion that the rest of the world has got it wrong, is “slipping”, has fallen from (Enlightenment) grace, has been corrupted. Only Hip Hop sees with clear eyes.

“Knowledge kicks to the head”

The Los Angelino rapper Karns explains that

the most important thing that’s taught in the Nation of I slam is knowledge of self . . . it’s a school of knowledge (in Fernando 1994: 144-5)

Knowledge, or, as it is referred to, ‘science’, is central to the notion of Hip Hop nationality. Blaze understands knowledge as the telos of the Hip Hop Nation:

We live, breathe, die for the evolution of the Intelligent Nation

And this is where we can see most explicitly the development of the idea that other ‘nations’, including the nation-state complexes
of the "mainstream", the "powers that be", have "got it wrong" Blaze calls upon his brothers (sic) to "wake up!".

To understand why, is to know why. Don't be stupid. Be rational & logical. If you have questions, ask them. Seek out information. As BDP [Boogie Down Productions] said 'You must learn'. Whether it be in school or on the streets.

At stake here is a society that Blaze describes as "slipping":

we must find answers to the head-smacking problems that circulate in our slipping society.
Racism/sexism/culturism/ageism/homophobia [these rammed into each other, building up a vast, polysyllabic monolith, a single word] etc... should be eliminated because they don't promote harmony, they only encourage conflict.

Blaze is addressing the media representation of rap and Hip Hop as being inherently violent. A "bullet in the head" does not, on Blaze's account, constitute "an answer" to these "pressing problems". Instead, he advocates "a knowledge kick to the head" (my italics). The agent of this moment of historical awakening is to be "youth", which

must/should hear a variety of opinions from various locales/races/religions, so that they can examine/disect/interpret on their own time.

Truth, then, is at a premium. The Hip Hop Nation can be distinguished from both the monolithic, hypocritical 'powers that be' and from its 'enemies' by its fundamental commitment to truth.

Hip Hop operates epistemologically: it is a way of knowing. Through Hip Hop, one can find truth. Hip Hop, coming from 'the streets'—that is, drawing upon an unmediated, empirical experience of the world—is free from the cluttering ideologies of the mainstream. It kicks reality. Blaze's analysis here is one of a 'false consciousness' against which Hip Hop is mobilised. He attacks, for example, "crap" music which is responsible for
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

hiding the real life everyday issues under a gloss-encrusted carpet...

—taking care, however, not to deny the “right” of others to make such music; tolerance, after all, is a fundamental Enlightenment/Hip Hop discourse. The problem is, rather, a question of priorities. Big budgets, Blaze claims, are wasted on “wack artists” offering “fake happiness/smiles/cover-ups/safety”, budgets that could be spread around to artists offering, instead, “insights/intelligence/controversy/originality”. Hip Hop can offer all of these, in spades. You see, Blaze says,

we as a people of this world have a responsibility to undertake. To make this land a better land (but not in a religious sort of way) . . . We need to progress . . . Conformity is degradation and stagnation.

There can be no clearer summary of what I frequently heard referred to as “the ideology” or “ideals” of Hip Hop. The discourses of knowledge, originality, progress and self-expression define the essence of Hip Hop, according to this discourse. This discourse (of the essence of Hip Hop Culture), I have suggested, is identical to that which Appadurai calls the ideoscape of the “Enlightenment worldview”. And yet, within Hip Hop, this ideoscape must define Hip Hop as being somehow fundamentally different. Apologists for Hip Hop must argue that the discourses of freedom, progress and so on informing ‘mainstream society’ operate ideologically, to conceal that mainstream’s real aim, which is to render the “mass populus” docile. Alternatively, less damningly, Hip Hop can argue that for whatever reason, the mainstream is simply incapable of recognising the real, and that the real can only now be retrieved or represented by the phenomenologically and epistemologically privileged few.

Blaze is, of course, speaking what he understands as ‘common sense’. These are what politicians call ‘motherhood issues’, assertions with which one is unlikely to find an argument. What is interesting here, however, is the passion in Blaze’s writing: the very fact that he feels so strongly that the world is not governed
by such ideals. The centrality of ‘youth’ to his concerns echoes that
desire to construct youth as the agent of radical social change that
Harris (1992) identifies in post-Birmingham cultural theory: the
recruitment of a putatively ‘alienated’ or disaffected youth to fill
the aporia in marxian analyses left open by the failure of the
working class to fulfil its (orthodox) Historical destiny. Def Wish
raps:

A perfect example of youth overtaking the system
Are trains running with panels and the release of our
album

(“Running Amok”)

There is, of course, always a discontinuity between discourse and
practice. Blaze understands that homophobia and sexism are bad,
but often his own critical practice, as we have seen, strayed into
the perjorative use of ‘homophobic’ or ‘sexist’ stereotypes. And
while the discourses of tolerance and respect were pervasive
throughout the scene, the Hip Hop world was one that decidedly
privileged the masculine over the feminine.

So that’s the ‘state ideology’ of the Hip Hop Nation. Miguel’s weekly
column in 3-D World also frequently invoked the Nation as a form
of Hip Hop social imaginary: these written texts, spilling over with
dynamic prose and grammatical inventiveness colourfully develop
these ideas about tolerance, belongingness, knowledge: the
inwardly directed sub-discourse of nationalism which, following
Hage, I want to characterise as nurturing (feminised) and
inclusive. The other sub-discourse identified by Hage is that of the
nation as Fatherland: a discourse directed outwards, with a view to
projecting an identity into a community of identities. And there is
no better example of such a mode of nationalism in Sydney Hip
Hop than Def Wish Cast’s showstopper, “A.U.S. Down Under Comin’
Up(per)”.

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"A.U.S.T." . . .

. . . three verses of what Def Wish describes, in his rhyme, as "a simpler b-boy kind of rap", punctuated by an incantatory refrain:

A.U.S Down Under Comin' Upper
A.U.S Down Under Comin' Upper
A.U.S Down Under Comin' Upper

First, Def Wish himself raps over DJ and producer Vame's slammin' mix:

It won't be too long before we're breaking down the doors of record companies who ignore the fact that hip hop down under is just as strong . . .

. . . the backing track hangs in suspension and Def Wish completes his condemnation of these ignorant, parasitical record companies, oblivious to the power and truth of this home grown Hip Hop right under their noses:

but they continue to live off imported songs . . .

Die C's rhymes assert the inevitable success of the larrikin, upstart Aussie rappers:

A.U.S.T. defender Die C delivering strong and aggressive lyrics heard clearly
In every other barricade across the world
. . . an island that many never look twice at as being associated with rap—

Def Wish Cast's first EP release, "Mad as a Hatter", I was told, went to Number 2 on the Norwegian Hip Hop Charts. Die C charges on:

Where's the pride? Many'd rather just step aside. See what the rest of the world is doing and live their lives lounging.
Determined not to fall prey to simply 'following', Die C's rap is a folk critique of the malaise identified by poet and critic A. A. Phillips in the 1950s as the "Australian Cultural Cringe" (Phillips 1958): a pathological national dependence upon the canons and institutional structures of European high art in lieu of an identifiable 'national' cultural identity.¹⁹

Hold up a new flag

... Die C continues, drawing upon contemporaneous public debate about the desirability of removing the Union Jack from the Australian flag:

The letters that stand alone  
Not in the shadow of any other country  
Def Wish Cast from the A.U.S.T.

It is absolutely critical to understand Def Wish Cast's national-cultural project in the context of Phillips' massively influential critique, the effects of which continue to ripple through the decades. Take the Arts Policy statement published in the final eighteen months of Paul Keating's (putatively) Social-Democratic Labor Federal government in 1995. Keating, in the final term of his office was promoting multiculturalism and republicanism as de facto state ideologies.²⁰ A self-styled champion of the arts, Keating's hand is evident in the construction of the Creative Nation Commonwealth Cultural Policy (1994). The document's introduction predicates a national 'we', accessed through a "culture" which is fundamental to our understanding of who we are" (5). And yet there is the same circularity of logic apparent in the discourse of the Hip Hop Nation: "[c]ulture is that which gives us a sense of ourselves" (5): this is a discourse of immanence, almost tautological in its determination of the relationship between 'culture' and 'identity': culture both generates our 'we-ness', and is (of course) the key to understanding who that 'we' is. The Policy document quotes Keating:

The Commonwealth's responsibility to maintain and
develop Australian culture means . . . that on a national level;
• innovation and ideas are perpetually encouraged
• self-expression and creativity are encouraged
• all Australian have a chance to participate and receive [cultural material] (90).

Keating, apparently, was using Blaze as a speech writer around this time. I don’t want to dwell any longer on state nationalist/cultural ideology; the point has been to demonstrate the (hardly surprising) neat fit between their respective discourses.

Creative Nation also identifies two centrifugal ideas about Australian national culture, the first being the aforementioned “cringe” (5), the second an over-compensatory “cultural strut” (6). Def Wish Cast’s jingoism is perhaps a manifestation of this latter tendency: “methinks the lady doth protest too much”, as Hamlet said.

Ser Reck’s contribution to the track offers an ethnographic account of the Australian Hip Hop Nation:

Piece’d with Brisbane, drank with Adelaide boys
Perth kicks, Melbourne society making the noise

—namechecking the components of The Nation, demonstrating its tangibility, its basis in experience. Ser Reck has been to all these places, gone bombing with them, got drunk with them. It is the same argument used by writers to demonstrate the tangibility of the global Hip Hop Nation: they can exchange photographs, outlines, tactics, paint, handy hints and so on, with other bombers across the world. They can, they told me, go to visit penpals in Berlin, New York, Copenhagen and be instantly ‘at home’. Nation, again, as heimat.

Ser Reck’s rhyme takes the other tack, however. This Aussie Hip Hop Nation is

. . . trying to break out, it’s like a marathon
Engaging yourself in a market, takin' the world on

Once again, the mercantile metaphors conflate with those of sport. Australia, he concludes, is

an island with more than just a dream
With a stand in Hip Hop,
A definite mark . . .
A journey to embark on
All bands on an outbreak not a remake
A.U.S.T. on a path to overtake ya!

And the track leaps into its raucous chorus again . . .

The trope of the Hip Hop Nation, then, emerges as a mechanism through which this process of identification with geographical, racial and cultural 'others' can be negotiated. The imaginary Hip Hop Nation is predicated upon a shared 'otherness', rather than upon a continuity of "national, ethnic, local, class or trade-specific identities". As I have already noted, the sense of 'globalism', literally of 'transnationalism' carried in the formulation 'Hip Hop nation' is evidenced in experience: the 'universal language' of graff, for example, seems to transcend (conventional) national boundaries; bombers, I would be told, would be welcomed by other bombers anywhere in the world, a claim justified by the experience of those who had travelled to Europe or North America—or even interstate within Australia. The point is that what might seem like a particularly abstract 'idea' had a basis in practice and experience. Indeed, this global aspect of Hip Hop was often cited to me as both evidence for the vitality and reality of Hip Hop itself, and as one of the "best things about Hip Hop", facilitating a sense of compassion, tolerance and, perhaps most importantly for the participants and 'believers', a sense of optimism and purpose: the ills of the 'slipping system' could be, if not righted, then at least addressed, through, as Blaze put it, "probably the most accepting racially diverse culture that exists today".

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West Side

To be national is to 'possess' a territory, without which there is no national existence.

Ghassan Hage (1993a:76)

While U2 were talking about "The Streets With No Name", Eazy [E] and [Ice] Cube [of the Los Angelino crew Niggaz With Attitude (NWA)] were talking about Crenshaw, Slauson, Gauge and Figeroa. U2 may have meant well with their liberal rhetoric, but they missed the kind of naming that occurs from below, even when there are no street signs. How else do you find your way home? Hiphop in many ways is a map for precisely this purpose.

Brian Cross It's Not About A Salary: Rap, Race + Resistance in Los Angeles (1994: 3)

You look at the main thing of Hip Hop and every group and everything they represent their area and they represent their neighbourhood it's the same with us our friends are around where we live where we live that 's like our home we know it so well like the back of our hand and so yeah, we represent the people we see everyday you know what I mean and plus the people like that live somewhere else, yeah, like we class Sydney as one, but the West as our home really.

(anonymous) Sydney writer

Penrith lies at the foot of the Blue Mountains, about 60km to the west of the City of Sydney21. The train trip there takes about an hour from my own home in the City 'proper', traversing the sprawling suburbs of Greater Sydney, cresting the slight rise of hills past Parramatta, the source of the river which eventually broadens into the tourist guide cover-picture Harbour. Far from the famous surf'n'sand postcard glamour, this is the demographic heart of Sydney: Blacktown, Revesby, Rooty Hill. The train tracks
level off onto the flat plains of Western Sydney; the ridge of the mountains beyond the Nepean River stands crisply against the blue blue midsummer sky. Beyond the first ridge of the mountains, the deep blue-green lumpy massifs of the range shimmer in the heat, and you start to sweat despite the train’s air conditioning.

This is Western Sydney; “West Side”. Tracts of housing spread amidst scrubby parklands of baked yellow grasses and stands of ochre eucalypts. Around each suburb, high fencing screens off the expressways and train tracks. And as I journey westwards across this urban vastness, a book on my lap, the graffiti flashing past, the cliche-begging monotony of the suburbs stretching blandly out on either side of the tracks, I realise that any potential understanding that I might have of, for example, Def Wish Cast, their music, their style, their very being, must begin with my journey westwards.

I’m on my way ‘out’, as Sydney-siders put it, ‘to the western suburbs’, to catch a Hip Hop gig: Def Wish Cast, a number of other local crews, and an imported American (i.e. African-American) act. The concert, the ‘Mid-summer Melt-down’ is being marketed as a ‘celebration of street culture’; posters promise a skateboard ramp, graffiti walls and rap, rap, rap. This is the third consecutive summer weekend of the show, a moveable feast staged in different urban and sub-urban centres around Greater Sydney. Today is to be the triumphant ‘return’ to the West Side; a celebratory staging of the event in the Penrith rugby league stadium, deep in the suburban (Hip Hop) heartland.

By chance, as I hand my ticket to the guard at Penrith Station, Blaze and his wife Angela spot me. “Am I glad to see you . . .” Blaze smiles, and we head for the taxi rank to share a cab to the stadium. “By the way, I like your article . . .” I’d given Blaze some writing the week before, an exercise in reflexivity, I suppose.22 I had quoted him, written of his writings, the role he takes in the Hip Hop Nation. “It was a bit academic . . . I didn’t know who all the philosophers you referred to were . . . but it was good.” Angela
corrects him: "His thesis . . .", and I smile, assuring them that a thesis is an altogether larger piece of work. And so we begin to negotiate our positions as they pay the taxi fare, and we stroll over to the Penrith Football Stadium.

"Days like this . . . I just can't wait to get them over with," Blaze confides, a little guiltily, as we enter the stadium. Blaze is DJing this afternoon, in about twenty minutes, with the Know­ble/Noble/No Bull Savages, a crew based in Bondi. Indeed, today is work for both of us. I realise that both of us, all three of us, are outsiders. Clearly so in my case: I am the researcher, isolated by my age; my appearance; my cultural otherness; my video camera; my language; my ‘sensible’ clothes; my sensible haircut; my embodiment; my possession of some knowledges, my ignorance of others; my geography; my interest in being here. Blaze and Angela’s outsider-ness is equally as illuminating. "You must come out here a lot," I suggest to Blaze, referring to the self-styled “West Side” epicentrism of Sydney Hip Hop. "This is the second time," he offers. They had spent the night before at Blacktown, a satellite centre roughly half way between Parramatta and Penrith, at Angela’s sister’s house. Angela recalled being driven to Blacktown to visit this sister at the age of nine or ten, and at the time trying to convince her father that they had missed the turn-off, that they had driven too far. This morning, waiting for the train at Blacktown station, Angela tells me, she had felt nervous, if not scared: "Let’s get out of here," she had thought. So, I arrive bit by bit at an understanding of “West Side”. Just beyond the stadium lies “Panthers”, the club-entertainment complex of the Penrith Rugby League Club: a sprawling shopping mall dimensioned palace of poker machines, bars, hotels, gymnasiums, swimming pools and cabarets; a one-stop pleasure dome for the 1990s suburbanite, a cruise liner washed up 60 kilometres from the ocean. Backdropping Panthers, notwithstanding the subsuming creep of suburbs along the Great Western Highway towards previously distinct towns and villages, the Blue Mountains mark the physical western extremity of Greater Sydney. Inexplicably, today the concert organisers have chosen to orient the stage towards the
east: as the afternoon wears on, the audience, raked down the football stand, shield their eyes against the westering sun as it progressively robs them of shade. Opposite us, the western stand is empty. The pay off is, I speculate, that the MCs of Def Wish Cast and 046, and to a lesser extent, the Funky/Fonke Nomads/Knowmaads and The Noble Savages, their backs almost literally pushed hard up against the mountains, get to address their raps seawards, back across the West Side, towards the city in the east.

The West Side as the ‘inscape’ of Hip Hop National Identity

Here comes that chorus again . . .


In the slamming break between Die C’s and Ser Reck’s verses on “A.U.S.T.”, DJ Vame has sampled an African-American MC antiphonically responding to the voices of the crew namechecking the suburbs of Sydney’s far west:

St Claire’s in the house
St Mary’s in the house
Mt Druitt’s in the house

... culminating in the climactic

Aaaah . . . Penrith’s in the house!

It’s tempting, but perhaps just a little too smart, to read this moment as one of the negotiation of cultural contexts: the African American voice brought into play with the overcoded ‘Aussie-ness’ of the chanted suburb names. In performance, in classic Hip Hop call and response form, Def Wish Cast’s pogo-ing audience anticipates the rappers’ appearance on stage with an air-punching chant, again sampled by Vame as the introduction to Def Wish’s ragga-rap tour de force, “Stupid Kind of People”: 247
West Side! West Side! West Side!

And amongst the fantastic “syllable ballistics” (Blaze in Vapors), Def Wish raps:

I'm takin the time to perpetrate the slammin' style of raggamuffin commin up from the west of Sydney doing it, doing it properly to the beat . . . [a] rappar coming from the W.E.S.T . . .

Again and again this place appears in the raps of Def Wish Cast: “The [definite article] West”, “The [definite article] West Side”, “the W.E.S.T.”, “far west”, and so on . . . The West that “runs amok” (“Running Amok”), that constitutes the readership of graffiti on trains (“A piece seen by the whole West-side” raps Die C, celebrating the power of writing on “Perennial Cross Swords”), the West that constitutes the constituency of the Hip Hop Community, for whom the crew raps. Def Wish calls his rhymes “the saga from the suburbs . . . that's The West . . .” (“Battlegrounds of Sydney”). On the same track, another rap offers a street level counter to the pervasive spatio-temporal tropes of Australian cultural anteriority, “the Cultural Cringe” (Phillips 1958); Die C challenges all those who claim that Australian Hip Hop is “behind”:

That might of been the case before
But Def Wish Cast has redefined their way of thinking
People come out here throw flames at our nest of crews in Sydney

But they never got to hear The West!

And so, Def Wish Cast's Aussie Hip Hop is emblematic of the

Down under comin' up!

Here is an attempt to institute Sydney's western suburbs, or, more specifically, Sydney's far western suburbs, as the authentic 'home' ('hood') of Sydney Hip Hop, in the context of two convergent discourses about communal identity. The first is that identified by Homi Bhabha in terms of the "recurrent metaphor of landscape as
the inscape of national identity" (1994b: 143); this is the impossibility of thinking 'nation' without thinking 'place'. The second convergent discourse is perhaps a sub-set of the first: the generic 'rap' concern with 'place' (cf Decker 1993; Cross 1994—see above), manifesting as a (generic) injunction to write 'place' into one's rap and to assert a (geographical) point of origin and (therefore) a population or constituency from which, and for whom, one's rap is spoken. This is, in turn, bound up in the Hip Hop discourse of 'representation' (see Maxwell and Bambrick 1994: 6-15). The experience of living in a periphery, an 'under'-place, can be equated with the Hip Hop discourses of origin in The Bronx, or an imaginary downtown Los Angeles, or Philadelphia. These narratives of origin, graphically portraying the decayed inner-city zones of North American metropoli circulate in the various accounts constituting the Hip Hop mediascape, from the more 'high-brow literature' (Jones' celebration of The Bronx is exemplary), in hundreds of raps, in the magazines and so on, the identification of specific places of origin is celebrated, as Decker (1993) notes. The qualitative aporia, the vast, almost, one would think, incommensurate empirical differences between the experience of growing up in the dense hoods of The Bronx and the sprawling outer suburbs of Sydney, characterised if anything by a lack of a sense of 'neighbourhood-ness', is subsumed under the posited assumption of a shared experience of neglect.

The corollary of the Hip Hop concern with time and place identified by Decker is a generic encouragement of the discursive production (and adduction) of a specific geographics within the Hip Hop Community, and the attendant discourses of 'representing', to which I shall turn later. From the earliest days the North American raps that circulated in the Sydney scene named districts and neighbourhoods. That local raps followed suit is no surprise. The problem was, however, to name the neighbourhood which a local rap practice could be said to represent.

The construction of the West Side, and the privileging of the western suburbs of Sydney as the 'place' of Hip Hop in Sydney is
an attempt to authenticate Sydney Hip Hop by both ‘demonstrating’ that this Hip Hop speaks for a ‘real’ constituency, and that this constituency is somehow identifiable with, or commensurate with, an African-American urban underclass. Sydney Hip Hop thereby is able to stake a claim to a counter-hegemonic, if not underclass, status, and is able to understand and present itself as being an ‘authentic’ expression of, or response to, the experience of oppression. In this translation of the inner-city North American experience to the sprawling outer suburbs of Sydney, the marginalising Hip Hop discourses of ‘the streets’, ‘the underground’ and so on, are literalised in terms of geographic peripherality: Sydney Hip Hop becomes “postcards from the edge of the underside”, or tales from “the underground table”\textsuperscript{23}. The rappers of Def Wish Cast assert their Hip Hop authenticity by rhetorically adopting the position of the mouthpieces of a downtrodden lumpen class denied access to cultural capital, marginalised by a ‘mainstream’/centralised bourgeois culture which has lost touch with ‘the street’, which is crippled by false ideology, populated by suckers and perpetrators, by half-steppers’ and sell-outs, and which fails to recognise a reality accessible only through remaining in touch with the street.

A Map of Sydney

Sydney is a massive city, its population of around four million sprawling nearly 70 kilometres from the salubrious, soap opera scenery of the Northern beaches to the green swathe of the Royal National Park in the south; the same distance lies between the picture postcard sweep of Bondi Beach on the Eastern seaboard and the flood plains of the Nepean River, at the foot of the Blue Mountains, the western-most extremity of the Cumberland Plain. To the south-west, dormitory suburbs, by now satellite cities, have sprung up along the axis of the road and rail trunk routes to Canberra, the national capital, and Melbourne, a thousand kilometres to the south.
"The City", notes Shirley Fitzgerald, is, for Sydney residents, that 'bit in the middle' (1994: 79), a place that one goes to for work, to shop, to go to the cinema, but in which, at least until the State Government's push in the early 1990s for 'urban consolidation', no-one lives. Ringed by Victorian workers' terrace suburbs, gentrified in the 1970s and 1980s and now populated by the professional classes, the 'City' itself is the hole in the demographic doughnut.

In the narrative of mid-1980s Sydney Hip Hop, 'The City' figures as the empty centre, "played-out" (Sound Unlimited: Tales From the Underside publicity material 1992), populated by suburban kids 'going into town', night clubbing, and often affecting Hip Hop style. These are the 'weekend warriors', the 'half-steppers', understood as following trends rather than 'committing' themselves to the culture: the City, then, is coded as a site of pretence and inauthenticity.

In the early days, I was told, there were attempts to locate Hip Hop in 'the city': "everyone would go to the city and hang out," one writer explained; but the effort required was too great: "... from there, um, it sort of died out." Hip Hop flourished, instead, "in the suburbs ... on the streets": authentic, fresh, real. So, inverting the North American 'version' of urban Hip Hop, in Sydney it was the suburbs that were conflated with 'the street', with 'the real': the suburbs became Hip Hop's 'place'.

But not just any suburbs. 'The West Side' is an imaginary location whose geographical referent has actually shifted with successive generations of crews and other Hip Hop activists, in step with the gradual westward shift of Sydney's population. For the earlier generation—the West Side Posse, Sound Unlimited Posse—the Hip Hoppers of the mid 1980s, the West Side was the inner west: Burwood, Parramatta. When I was doing my research, in the early 1990s, The West Side had, following Sydney's demographic shift, crept closer to the Blue Mountains, out to Penrith and Mt Druitt.
'The Westie Syndrome'

'The Western Suburbs' (capitalised, prefixed by the definite article) are probably best understood less as a geographical locus than as an imaginary 'other', a periphery constituting the grounds against which central 'cosmopolitan' Sydney is constructed. Diane Powell's *Out West* (1993) traces the development of this demonisation, demonstrating the prevalent public (i.e. media) discourses of the western suburbs operating to erase difference, homogenising a vast, complex range of peoples and lifestyles into an imaginary population characterised as being working class and of primarily 'ethnic' background. From her extensive analysis of print media (in particular the daily broadsheet *The Sydney Morning Herald*), Powell argues that life in Western Sydney is portrayed in terms of lack and excess: lack of facilities, beauty, culture, refinement, taste, health; excess of crime, violence, poverty, broken homes, single mothers, unemployment, welfare recipients. Any positive aspects, she argues, are played down. Further, the locals tend to be portrayed as passive victims, unable to help themselves, but nonetheless culpable for their inferior condition. Building on Powell's analysis, Symonds recognises the contributory significance of demographic features, while arguing that a materialist analysis cannot account for the depth, intensity and often, the irrationality of the mythical construction of the west as an "impossible ... uncivilised ... negatively valued", erasing difference and constructing "a significant portion of Sydney's geographical area as a negatively valued, homogeneous entity" (Symonds 1993: 64)

And it is a significant portion. A 1988 review of urban planning policy (Spearritt and DeMarcos 1988) offers a geographicohistorical overview, defining "Western Sydney" as:

the area extending from Parramatta to the Blue Mountains and from Hawkesbury to Liverpool . . . [having] a young population and a high proportion of non-English-speaking migrants . . . [and] average
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

household incomes . . . lower than in the Sydney region (65).

These are dormitory suburbs built largely since the Second World War to cope with the rapid influx of migrants, largely drawn from Mediterranean Europe. Developed by real estate, finance and construction institutions with little regard for coherent planning principles, the western suburbs literally sprawl for dozens of kilometres, the expanse of privately owned (or, more correctly, mortgaged) free-standing, quarter acre block brick homes broken occasionally by ill-conceived public housing estates, such as those in Campbelltown and Mt Druitt (Spearritt and DeMarco 1988: 67). Paul (Ser Reck from Def Wish Cast) was fond of telling me that the Western Suburbs are ‘the future’. 1988 Australian Bureau of Statistics growth projections for the Sydney region bear this out, anticipating that “Western Sydney” will constitute, by 2011, 37.7% of the overall population, up from an estimated 30.9% in 1986 (in Spearritt and DeMarco 1988: 66). The figures presented in Figure one, below, indicate the rapidity of growth in this outer western belt of Sydney following the Sydney Region Outline Plan of 1968’s identification of Mt Druitt, Penrith and Blacktown as “three new towns” upon which Sydney’s expansion would be centred (from Spearritt and DeMarco: 67).

Figure 1

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<tr>
<td>Penrith</td>
<td>61 000</td>
<td>80 950</td>
<td>108 720</td>
<td>135 342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C’town</td>
<td>34 700</td>
<td>53 550</td>
<td>91 525</td>
<td>121 297</td>
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<tr>
<td>M’ville</td>
<td>96 796</td>
<td>87 796</td>
<td>83 448</td>
<td>81 647</td>
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<td>Mt Druitt</td>
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<td>112 000</td>
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(Spearritt and De Marcos [1988: 71, 136-137] from Australian Bureau of Statistics Census. Note that the figures for Mt Druitt are approximate only)
Symond’s analysis considers the conventional materialist reading of such demographic data: the narrative of a working poor pushed into the hinterland as the Victorian working man’s terrace houses of the inner city neighbourhoods are gentrified. To characterise the Western Suburbs as ‘working class’ however, is problematic. Symonds argues that “there are two basic problems” with predicing a “middle-class, materialist basis” for the popular, denigrating mythos of the western suburbs, suggesting that ethnicity (“and gender” suggests Symonds without any elaboration), at least, also has significant effects. Further

‘the west’ is not just poor and working class (as opposed to the seeming uniformity, according to Edward Soja, of Los Angeles). There is wealth and a strong middle-class self-consciousness amongst many western Sydney residents (1992: 65).

Industrial development, and therefore employment opportunities, have not kept up with the rapid population growth in the west. Horvath et al, using the results of the 1986 Australian Census of Population and Housing (Horvath et al 1989) note that the period of the development of the far western suburbs as residential zones was also a period of the radical deindustrialisation of Sydney in general:

In 1971 Sydney was a manufacturing city with a large industrial working class . . . In 1986 blue-collar workers comprised only twenty-one per cent of the labour force (Horvath et al 1989: 48)

“The overall pattern,” they conclude, “is one of industrial decline” (44). The period from 1981 to 1986 saw a 17.3% reduction in workers involved in manufacturing across Sydney, growth being experienced in the sectors of “Finance, property and business” (23%), “Community Services” (15%) and Recreation and Personal Services (12.6%) (44). The main industry in the west has been, in fact, construction: literally in the building of the suburbs, and the provision of services for the growing population.
Heavy industrial activity, such as refining and steel-making tend to be located along coastal strips to Sydney’s north and south (the port cities of Newcastle and Wollongong/Port Kembla respectively). There are few economy of scale advantages to be gained from locating industry in the west, although there has been some manufacturing development in the Liverpool/ Minto/ Campbelltown corridor, where government incentives sought to attract investment. By 1976, for example, twenty two major industries, including Comalco, Volvo and Pirelli had established manufacturing plants in the Minto Industrial Estate (Spearritt and de Marco 1989: 73), while over 5000 jobs had been created in the Macarthur area (centred on Campbelltown) by 1986, contributing to a total of 27000 jobs in 425 industries in the area (76). In the light of the massive influx of population to the region noted above, however, it can be seen that demand for work would exceed supply, requiring aspiring job-seekers to travel outside the district (using an inadequate transport infrastructure), and resulting in a chronic unemployment problem.

As Symonds argues

the ethnic heterogeneity of the population, its dispersal over large areas and the lack of centralised industry mitigates against an analysis of the Western Suburbs in terms of it being ‘working class’ (65).

He also makes the point that there are large areas of ‘middle class wealth and sensibility’ amongst the ‘western suburbs’. Symonds is arguing that the construction of the Western Suburbs as ‘working class’ is precisely that: an imaginative construct, rather than an empirical socio-economic fact; that notwithstanding Horvath et al’s identification of Sydney as a city experiencing a general pattern of ‘industrial decline’, the vast bulk of the development of the western Suburbs has taken place subsequent to this decline.

That the population of the Western Suburbs in general constitutes an ‘underclass’, however, is a more sustainable proposition. Horvath et al “essentially identify working class Sydney” as
forming a triangle "from the outer western suburbs around Penrith-Mt Druitt to the outer south-west (Campbelltown) and then to the northern tip of Botany Bay" (48; see maps pvii, and Spearritt and DeMarcos' 'definition' of 'western Sydney' above): in other words, precisely what Def Wish cast call 'the West Side'. The public housing areas of Mt Druitt and Campbelltown are characterised by "extreme concentrations of poverty" (58), while the Census Districts of Airds (near Campbelltown), St Marys and Penrith ranked two, three and four respectively in a listing of "Relatively Poor Sydney" (86).

An economic corollary of the service-industrial base of employment is a vulnerability to economic downturn. Areas populated by high densities of people from non-English speaking backgrounds suffer first and recover last from extended recessions, such as those of 1982-3 and 1987-1990, creating a vast pool of long-term unemployed. The major concentrations of unemployment in Sydney can be found in Airds, Cabramatta and Fairfield (52), with unemployment tending to be a direct function of distance from the Central Business District (of Sydney itself). Horvath et al go on to note the concentration of youth unemployment "in outer-suburban areas, particularly in areas with large concentration of public housing such as Mt Druitt" (ibid). The locating of a major university campus in Penrith is one governmental response to these problems: plans for Chifley University (realised as The University of Western Sydney) were announced by the Federal Government in 1987 (Spearritt and DeMarcos 66). Def Wish's father expressed to me in late 1993 his desire that his son complete his undergraduate work in graphic design at this campus. The university union also offered occasional performance opportunities for Def Wish Cast and other crews in the early 1990s.

The important point is that the (sub)urban landscape of Sydney's Western Suburbs is not so much 'post-industrial' itself: there has been no collapse of industry, of the body politic as such; rather, it is a landscape that is very much the product of a post-industrial
world, a world in which the 'industrial' bit happened elsewhere. Essentially, the Western Suburbs are a massive, very recent encampment of displaced, ethnically heterogenous, populations: it is this sense of displacement, of not-belonging, leading to a 'yearning' for community (Hage 1991), rather than an socio-economically grounded class-identification, that is ultimately of significance. However, in terms of the present discussion, the argument that Symonds is making is that the demonisation of the Western suburbs is not adequately accounted for in its totality in strictly materialist terms.

As alternative explanation for the depth and intensity of 'the westie syndrome', suggests Symonds, lies in a long-standing tradition in Australian literature of deriding 'the suburbs' as boring, uninspiring and isolated (and often, too, peaceful, clean). Barry Humphries, for example, derives much of the humour of his character Dame Edna Everidge from her suburban gaucherie. When it comes to the western suburbs, however, Symonds argues, even the positive aspects of suburban life are removed. Peacefulness, leafiness, cleanliness: all these are absent. Instead, the west is violent, polluted, sparsely ugly, a wasteland where gangs roam, and youth is suicidal.

A third account of possible determinants of 'the westie syndrome' is derived from feminist, psychoanalytic and post-colonialist theories of the other: the western suburbs as the Other to Sydney's centre. The west here is considered as the formative contrast to the cultural ideal of the Sydney centre. Symonds argues, however, that the pre-eminent theories of otherness, those of de Beauvoir, Lacan and Said, are informed by the notion of desire: the desire for the other. However, this doesn't really seem to fit with the west, argues Symonds, pointing out that:

[i]t all [the West] is to be spurned. There is no fascination, no sense of the exotic or of sexual attraction. Certainly it is heavily investigated, measured and studied as an empirical case study by well-intentioned academics, but the 'westie' mythology holds no such
He even argues that the usually favoured 'others' of the Anglo centre, such as aboriginals and migrants, actually become dull when placed in the western suburbs; although well over half of Sydney's aboriginal population lives in the west, they lack the appeal of those inner-city ghetto aboriginals or the tribal aboriginals. Similarly, inner city migrants are valued for their 'fine food, writing and sensitivities', while westie migrants are "mostly reduced to loud cars and houses with balustrades... The western suburbs seem to envelop the[se] groups so that they lose the standard, theoretical desirability."

Symonds argues, then, that the west functions as the Sydney centre's cultural colony. On this account, the shaking off of the 'cultural cringe' in the 1970s was paralleled by massive expansion into the Western suburbs. A cosmopolitan centre developed as the west exploded—Sydney grew and divided itself materially and culturally. The centre saw the development of a powerful artistic-intellectual elite—Opera companies, dance, theatre, films, books, academics etc. No longer any need to leave these shores, to join Germaine Greer and Clive James. Sydney became a centre, able to rival overseas centres. The reproduction of local European and American cultural models made British colonialist ideas about Australia as materialistic, cultureless, without manners and learning, as still inhabited by violent criminals in a hot, dreary landscape could be fairly successfully challenged.

Symonds goes on to argue, however, that not only the cultural forms of the northern hemisphere were reproduced; so too was the colonial cultural relationship. The western suburbs became cast in the same relationship to the centre as Botany Bay had been to London. "Part of the British myth of Australia was almost exactly reproduced by the Sydney myth of 'the west'" (68). Symonds goes as far as to suggest that the west can be seen as Sydney's excrement in this respect—the convict stain removed from the centre by grafting it onto the population of the west.
An historical argument accompanies this analysis. Symonds suggests that Australia missed out on the European experience of the Enlightenment, and that the late 1960s through to the 1980s are understood as Australia's Enlightenment—an indubitable assumption of progress of culture and ideas. Enlightenment is paralleled by a condemnation of all that went before—all that went before, in this respect, was seen to live on in the west—"History" argues Symonds, "was spatially located and separated from 'the centre', as a contrast to its own progress" (69).

The overall conclusion that Symonds comes to is that the Western Suburbs now constitute, in the Sydney imaginary, what the centre once was—a convict colony and pre-modern. Suffering in this place is pre-modern. The Western Suburbs, then, is still enmired in a battle with nature. True, modern consciousness, the argument goes, can only be formed in the cosmopolitan swirl of the city. The West is coded in discourse as a place where, by definition, the modern subject, who is free, equal and rational, cannot exist.

Symonds concludes his survey by arguing that the Western Suburbs should be recognised as a centre, or a place with many centres. Quoting Raymond Williams, he poses the possibility of this place as a subject position, rather than as an object: if the west is being judged from the centre, it, the centre, should be judged from the west. This is a matter of “reversing the mythology and seeing what is valuable in the eastward gaze back to the shining towers of the coast” (71). This ‘returning of the centre’s gaze’, Symonds continues, will always operate within a field of contradictoriness, informed by a simultaneous desire for the centre’s ideas, money and culture, and a contempt for the its achievements.

The Hip Hop imagining of ‘The West Side’ follows Symonds’ redressive prescription to the letter. The almost parodic series of self-marginalisations and self-otherings, is in effect an active inversion of the ‘othering’ of the Western Suburbs, a reversal of the popular demonisation of the western suburbs troped by Symonds as ‘the Westie Syndrome’. This inversion is not without its contradictions: the ‘down under’ of Def Wish Cast’s rap is valued
insofar as it is ‘coming up’, thereby maintaining a logic privileging up over down. ‘Down’ is recoded, however, as ‘in touchness’: ‘the street’, ‘the underground’, and so on all become indices for ‘reality’, and the practices of ‘streetness’ are epistemological, even when nobody really ‘hangs out’ on any literal streets (hanging out is more likely to happen in bedrooms, see p286, below). The logic of other discriminating binarisms are more completely inverted: the city’s (colonising) gaze is returned, privileging the periphery over the centre, the ‘west’ over ‘the east’, through this epistemological gesture: the City is mistaken, deluded, subject to false ideologies (witness Blaze’s editorials). And as the rhyme above suggests, the temporal mapping of the western suburbs into a position of backwardness is displaced by the predication of the west as a site of literal cultural avant gardism: The western suburbs, the West Side is reinscribed as being in touch with global currents, a connection maintained through processes of dissemination (Bhabha 1994b) or contagion (Deleuze and Guattari (1987) which completely by-pass the linear logics of centre-periphery or top-down pedagogies.

But there is more going on here, too. The West Side is also (a) home. Indeed, Symonds recognises the assertion of ‘homeliness’ as being one of the first strategies of redress in the face of the centre’s demonising of the Western Suburbs (71). But as Hage argues, being at home always involves a process of ‘feeling at home’ (Hage, n.d.): that is, home is an affective space, the building of a home an affective practice. Hage’s Heideggerian analysis ontologises this process of dwelling—of building a dwelling, to argue that nationalist projects are ‘existential dramas’ which cannot ever be complete. Hage evokes the figure of the nomad as the archetypal ‘post-modern’ figure, mourning whatever traces of stability he [sic] can find in his wanderings (1993a: 102-3). From this figure he develops an ontological premising of a fundamental ‘homesickness’ (103) or ‘yearning’ (102) as the horizon of human being, a being whose being can only be understood, after Heidegger, in terms of the activity of dwelling: that is, Hage suggests, in the contemporary context, of the building of Nations.
Gilroy, similarly, understands the construction of pan-Africanist nationalism in North America as a response to the African-American experience of dislocation; both a literal geographical dislocation: 'the Middle passage', and the subsequent experience of marginalisation and cultural invisibility through and after slavery. It is not a great stretch to predicate an analogous structure at the heart of the contemporary Australian experience: a profound sense of dislocation informs not merely a single demographic, or a fraction (no matter how large) of the population; virtually all the population has arrived on these shores within the space of 208 years\(^2\). In such a context, Hip Hop Nationalism can be seen as a sub-genre of a socially pervasive set of nationalist projects:

the nation always figures as something yet to be achieved, or something that had been achieved in the past, was lost, but could be achieved again . . .
If the nation is perceived as possible what is needed is something that explains the failure of this possibility to materialise, *so far* (Hage 1993a: 99).

We have seen this throughout my examination of the discourses of Hip Hop in Sydney: the nostalgia for a lost Golden Age, the promise of another one to come; the calls for unity, in order to overcome the problems posed by 'society', and by the 'half-steppers', in short, the *others*, against whom the *true* citizen of the Hip Hop Nation is able to define their building/dwelling

"**There's no there, there**"\(^2\)

Def Wish explained to me, one baking summer day as we sat at St Mary's station, that he and his crew have "put the west on the map . . . people from Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, they all know about the West Side now". "So," I wondered, "what do you show someone who wants to see 'West Side'?" "That's it man," he replied, almost too poignantly: "there's nothing here" (Maxwell 1994a). But he means it literally: there is the trainline, a bullet-straight link stretching from the low ridge of the Blue Mountains, marking the
by-now transcended limit to the suburban sprawl (suburbs now march right up the once-prohibitive slopes), to the postcard Sydney of Harbour, Opera House, Bridge and Beaches, some 60 km to the east. There is ‘Australia’s Wonderland’, an amusement park set on a scrubby eucalypt plain, adjacent to the Eastern Creek motor raceway. There are the post-modern consumer palaces of Penrith, in the shadow of the mountains: Panthers entertainment complex, a vast, stranded ocean liner of poker machines, restaurants, bars and recreational facilities, and the glistening shopping malls of the Penrith CBD. There is Rooty Hill, with its massive RSL club and hotel accommodation. A clutch of cinemas in Penrith. A suburban rugby league ground (for the Penrith Panthers), a theatre (The Q), and now, a University (the University of Western Sydney). Otherwise, there is housing: vast expanses of free-standing bungalows, carpeting the Cumberland Plain, occasionally visible, over the top of wooden and concrete baffles, or through wire mesh fencing, from the freeway that parallels the trainline. The importance of this single pair of rails cutting across the plain is impossible to overstate; linking the West Side to the radial latticework of the ‘Sydney System’, the eight car trains carry tags and pieces across hundreds of kilometres of territory, threading together the far-flung community that is not one: the act of recognising someone’s tag on the other side of the city becomes in itself a community-constituting practice. The appeal to the young bomber is obvious.

Def Wish is Ghassan Hage’s nomad. Or rather, a young man named Simon Bottle, of Anglo-Celtic descent, is the nomad, living now in the tract housing of a sun-burnt gum-tree plain, surrounded by the ghosts of the Dharruk, whose words, borrowed from the Macquarie Dictionary, he inserts into his raps. And feeling the emptiness around him, Simon invented Def Wish, taking a new name from his graffiti practice (bear in mind Baudrillard’s description of graffiti as ‘free publicity for existence’ [1988: 21]), and invented, after a fashion, belongingness to a nation, with which he could negotiate his own being in, and colonisation of, this
strange, alien place: making a home not simply by being in a place, but being by making a home there.

Coda: Topographical Proliferation

The story doesn’t end there, of course. The assertion that the West Side is the authentic ‘home’ of Sydney Hip Hop places Hip Hoppers from the East, North and South in a somewhat precarious position. Recall Blaze’s discomfort at travelling to Penrith. And recall that Hip Hop ‘represents’: it must come from somewhere. Here, perhaps, a class divide opens up: Blaze and his friends, from the Eastern (central) part of the city, cannot predicate their Hip Hopness on a pure abstraction, upon a commitment to an idea. It was incumbent upon them to be able to offer an account of their authenticity predicated not only upon the history of their own practice as writers, breakers, rappers or DJs, but precisely upon a notion of home. Remember J.U.’s description of the purpose of the shop that he and Blaze opened in 1994: to ‘provide a focus ... a home for Hip Hop’, they told me. The shop was, of course, The Lounge Room, and indeed featured a battered old lounge chair and a coffee table, piled high with back copies of The Source, Vapors and Hype.

And in response to The West Side, The Eastside, The North and Southsides all started to appear in Hip Hop discourse: even The City, courtesy of The Lounge Room crew, became a Hip Hop place, or home. All in all, a proliferation of localities, the product of a kind of incitement to ‘cartographology’, to a knowing of the Greater City through the logic of cardinal representation.

A new map of the Down Under Hip Hop Nation, for those who were able to read it.
Footnotes

1 See Glossary, below.
2 In Australian Rules Football, a hybridisation of Gaelic football, football (soccer) and rugby, players are allowed to physically contact opponents, whether in possession of the ball or not, as long as the contact is made between the hip and shoulders, and the arms are not used to constrain or grab. The resulting mode of contact is fondly referred to as 'a hip and shoulder (charge)', a charge often launched from several metres' distance, and is gruffly balletic in nature, as distinct from the explosive directness of the blocker's art in American football.
3 An analysis of the increasing reliance of venues on high revenue-generating tribute and cover bands, and the concomitant decline of the live-music scene in Sydney is beyond the scope of this work.
4 And, on the other hand, to be a 'transit' (policeman [sic: they were all men in the 'graff squad']) is also to be tough, to have a blast, to fight a guerilla action against a uniformed adversary, to enjoy the hunt, and a beer afterwards. And so the game goes on, night after night.
5 There is an implicit self-critique here, too. In the interests of 'reflexive sociology' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) I must consider my own interest, and by extension, the interest of the academy, in locating in such cultural phenomena, something. This is a critique to which I shall return: that of the scholarly left's investment in 'youth', a determination to find, in various youth and counter-cultures, a revolutionary agent with the potential to substitute for a proletariat that absented itself without leave as the eschatological narrative of marxian history unfolded.
6 DJing was, as I have suggested, also often included as the fourth key Hip Hop practice.
7 See Glossary.
8 Note here my use of the term "invested": I am not arguing that in the case of the Hip Hop scene in Sydney there is a direct, palpable, quantifiable or even identifiable interest to be maintained. What I am most interested in is the investment of belief in the maintenance of and right to speak for a particular configuration of social being even where, upon closer examination, there is 'nothing' at stake. By way of illustration, I can think of examples where judgements about the generic 'fit' of particular raps or fusions of hip hop with other popular 'genres' where gradually replaced over time. Beyond the momentary embarrassment of having to make a sheepish acknowledgment of a contradiction, no 'damage' or loss of status accrued to the individuals in question. However, the initial judgement of inclusion or exclusion carried a context-specific weight and significance. Genre categories therefore can be seen as operant, as Briggs and Bauman suggest, strategically.
9 Of critical significance here is the implication of the investigator in the processes shaping 'the community'. Heeding the Bourdieuan advocacy of a reflexive sociology, I must note here the dialectical nature of this moment: the investigator has at least as much at stake in negotiating these questions of 'community' as do the social agents constituting the object of the research. Particularly in the context of post-graduate research, in which a person who is, perhaps, an 'apprentice' researcher, working in under-resourced, insecure (in terms of income and employment), (virtual) isolation, there is necessarily a bias towards a kind of positivism,
the product of a cathectic investment in the research object. There is a
desire to find some ‘thing’, to establish its significance in the eyes of
fellow students and of course the academic staff within the institutional
context, and in broader academic contexts as the fledging scholar attempts
to bring their work to notice. The pressure upon doctoral candidates to
market their work, to adopt an entrepreneurial pro-activity in regards to
their projects, compounding this inevitable personal investment in
research, is marked, and yet little remarked upon.
Bachelard advocated the quasi-therapeutic divestment of one’s philias (in
addition to one’s phobias) in the pursuit of ‘knowledge’ (1987 [1964]: 6): I
am making these remarks not (entirely) out of personal indulgence, but to
point towards a set of biases informing much research, particularly in the
fields with which I have had most contact through this present research.
The conflation of advocacy with analysis is particularly manifest in, for
eexample, African-American studies (cf Gates, for example), in areas of
women’s studies, in youth ‘sub-culture’ studies and in popular music
studies.

10 The quote is taken from Hegel’s essay “The State”, included in Kohn (ed)
1965: 110-112.
11 See Hage 1993b for an argument against the popular conflation of the
discourses of republicanism and multiculturalism in Australia, and
particularly the idea that Australian Republicanism is inherently
‘multicultural’. This conflation, Hage argues, masks what is in fact the
inherently monocultural (specifically Anglo-centric) nature of the
dominant discourse of Australian Republicanism.
12 Dick Hebdige’s 1987 account of Rastafarianism is perhaps the most
interesting attempt to contextualise nationalist ideologies within a broader
historical account.
13 See also Decker’s (1993) analysis of “The State of Rap: Time and Place in
Hip Hop Nationalism” in Social Text 34.
14 For Peirce, by contrast, all meaning and reference has always been
determined by processes of open semiosis, in which ‘the real’ is not that
which can be retrieved through a process of representation, but that
which is affected by, or affects those processes. For such thinking, there
is no terminal point guaranteeing ‘the real’, but instead chains of
interpreters layering up in networks of intertextuality and forming
habits.
15 A term borrowed from Rastafarian discourse.
16 The ethnoscape of the Sydney Hip Hop scene, as I have suggested, is
probably more usefully thought of as being poly-chromatic, rather than
simply ‘white’. My point here, however, is to foreground the problems
confronted by ‘non-Blacks’ in attempting to negotiate a ‘national’ identity
predicated upon ‘blackness’.
18 See Maxwell and Bambrick 1994 for an account of the discursive
strategies of Sydney crew Sound Unlimited as they attempted to
authenticate their signing with a major record label; Light 1990,
notions of ‘selling out’.
19 Phillips wrote that “above our [Australia’s] writers—and other artists—loom the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture. Such a situation
almost inevitably produces the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe" (Phillips 1958: 89).

20 Amongst a plethora of publications in Australian literary and public affairs/political journals such as Meanjin and Quadrant, popular press and current affairs media, the Research Centre for Intercommunal Studies publication Communal/Plural stands out in its sustained treatment of the issues circulating around Australian nationalism and cultural identity during this period. See particularly issues 2 (1993, subtitled Republicanism/Citizenship/Community, edited by Hage and Johnson), which includes important reflections on both the question of national identity (cf Burchell) and the nature of popular debate about the issue (Morris). Issue 4 (1995: An Inquiry into the State of Anglo-Saxonness Within the Nation edited by Hage, Lloyd and Johnson) develops post-colonialist perspectives on multiculturalism (Hage, Perera & Pugliese, Jayamanne).

21 See maps, pp vi & vii, above.

22 Developing this discussion, Blaze took the opportunity to turn my role as a questioner back on me. "What I don't understand . . . ", he put to me, ". . . is where does it go? What happens after you write that sort of thing . . . somebody reads it and what do they do with it?" The paper in question was Maxwell and Bambrick 1994. On another occasion, J.U. had suggested that this article was a failure, as it had spent too much time dealing with Sound Unlimited, and not 'the real thing'. See below.

23 See below.


25 And, of course, I intend no disrespect to the aboriginal peoples, who, after all, got here first, and now constitute but a tiny percentage of the population.

26 Gertrude Stein's apocryphal assessment of Oakland, California.

27 Returned Servicemen's League Club.
Part 4: Performance

Young people don’t really get into the politics of Hip Hop—they’re more into like the rhythm of it . . .

Blaze

“Listen to this . . .”

A friend is in my apartment. “Listen to this,” I tell her, and I put on a Souls of Mischief CD, “93 til Eternity”. I’ve taken to bringing this disc with me to parties, slipping it into the mix, experiencing a mischievous frisson, knowing that my friends are dancing to raps about gang-banging, about bitches and hoes. It’s dirty, funky: fluid, mellifluous bass riffs looping around and around, generating a miasmatic throb; abrasive scratches punctuate the drone, and across the foreground of the sonic space flow the sneering, nasal West Coast freestyles. Horn fills, guitar samples, a synthesiser wash flesh out the mix, an alien soundscape of sirens, alarms; stories of street life in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay area. It is, simply, my favourite rap music. My friend watches me (me!) as I groove, the beats registering in my shoulders, in the rocking of my head, my lips, I’m sure (because by now I know these raps), mouthing all the words, and I’m thinking “yes, this is what it is like, if I live this music, if I can inhabit it, if it inhabits me, then I can get somewhere else, I can go to this alien place where there are guns and gangs and hard, fluid bodies languidly hanging out on stoops, on street corners, with my home-boys, doing all that lazy, studied cool hand-shaking and high five stuff”.

And my friend looks at me and she says, “you know, when you listen to this music, it’s like you become another person”.

* * * * * * *
Now, the final part, in which we get into like the rhythm of it.

In which I acknowledge that all that has gone before in this thesis is, in fact, secondary.

In which I turn to the affective dimension of this thing; this thing that only after the experience is called Hip Hop.

In which I try to figure out what it is that is felt, that then enables someone to think: this is Hip Hop.

**From Performance to Representing, or, 'How to make (a) Culture'**

In the preceding sections I have discussed at length the kinds of discourses, narratives and genealogies circulating within the field of Sydney Hip Hop in the early 1990s. I have suggested that within or across this field, various agents engage in struggles or negotiations in order to legitimate and authenticate their practices within various narratives of a continuous 'cultural' tradition. These struggles, and the ontological grounding of these assumptions, are themselves informed by and grounded in discourses and values circulating within a broader public or cultural sphere: discourses, for example, of 'community', 'culture', 'truth', 'authenticity', 'nationalism', 'self-expression' and so on.

Now, I want to turn to a more specific, ethnographic consideration of the means by which the experiences and performances of these agents are articulated to these discourses. To do so, I want to centre my discussion on the idea of 'representing'. This word is used to describe the relationship of a given performance, artefact or statement to the cultural essence, Hip Hop. In what follows, I
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

want to examine some of these performances, artefacts and statements in order to demonstrate how the idea of a cultural essence (which exists, of necessity, outside history and genealogies) is sustained through strategies of explanation and narration. How the potential 'openness' of 'performance' is cleaved to a narrative, to a 'pedagogy'.

The affective dimension of these performances precedes and grounds the discursive accounts offered of them. These discourses of Hip Hop are 'pedagogic' (in the sense that Bhabha uses this term) techniques which operate to offer explanations of affective states, thereby constructing understandings and meanings for such states.

I have titled this section 'making a culture' because I want to stress the processural, ergonomic nature of the attempt to locate these affective states within a set of ideas about 'culture'. Various practices held to represent, or understood as representing this Hip Hop Culture are drawn towards each other; salient features are adduced, in discourse, implicitly or explicitly, pedagogically, by powerfully placed individuals in the scene, in order to construct logics of necessity, or homologies, which can then be used to support a thesis of causality. Through the on-going processes of the selection of the salient features of a given performance (a break-dance, a piece of graffiti, a record scratch, a recording, a rap), and offering an account of those features in terms of a narrative of 'culture' and 'representation', a cultural metaphysic is sustained, standing literally as 'that which has been represented'.

The constructed, interpreted nature of these homologies, or the 'iconicites of styles' across these practices is obscured by the narrative of representation, in which the formal qualities of the practices and performances are understood, within the field (and often from without) as being generated by the substratal form of 'the culture', and as therefore being symptomatic. More, these processes of interpretation and the 'institution of interpretations' (Weber 1987) generate further 'iconic propagations' (Lewis 1992) as the interpreting community itself becomes 'institutionalised'.
the whole thing hangs together as a function of belief. The linkages, the intertextualities, the propagations and iconicities between these practices, established though mundane processes of interpretation, are sustained by shared aesthetico-critical languages (hard core can refer to breaking, writing and rapping, as can burner) constituting what Hymes called ‘speech communities’ (Hymes 1972), and the sub-cultural capital resources for the drawing of distinctions (Thornton 1996) within the field of ‘youth culture’. Further, a broader assumption about the nature of cultural products operates to sustain the coherence of this cultural product: that they are, simply, ‘representative’: that they are all extensions of the same substance. In the words of one of my informants: “rapping, writing, breaking: they’re all the same thing”.

My own efforts then, in looking at the various performative artefacts that ‘represent’ Hip Hop Culture, will not be directed towards revealing ‘what they mean’. I do not attempt to read, for example, the music of Hip Hop in terms of how musicological qualities encode cultural values, or how they might reveal currents of cultural meaning. Rather, I will discuss how these musics are understood, within the field, as being meaningful. I am less interested in the ‘meaning’ of break-dancing in terms of its cultural genealogies than in terms of how genealogies of break-dancing are adduced to account for the meaning of a given performance of break-dancing in Sydney, in 1994, by middle class, Anglo-Australians. I want to understand how it is that these Sydney-based believers go about sustaining these beliefs.

My point will be that this belief itself is sustained by intensity of affect: that the apparently irreducible evidence of pre- or super-linguistic affective states stands as the clearest, most incontrovertible evidence, within the field, of the being of a thing called Hip Hop Culture.
‘True to the Music’

“If you want, I can define it in two words,” Blaze told me at our first meeting (I had asked him what ‘Hip Hop’ was). Hip Hop was, is, Blaze explained:

fat beats, dope rhymes

That’s actually four words, which I mention not to make fun of Blaze, but to recognize the conceptual clarity of his formulation (and only later did I come across the deviant spelling, ‘phat’); two elements are involved: the words and the music. And together, these elements are at the heart of Hip Hop.

So, what are fatness and dopeness? What determines which rhymes are dope, which beats are fat? Or, perhaps, who decides, and by what authority? How are the distinctions made?

A colleague walks past my office door and stops to listen to a rap CD looping through the ROM drive on this PC. After a minute or so he shakes his head and asks “is there any rap music that doesn’t have that attitude?”

A musicological account of various rap recordings is not sufficient to enable a listener to make distinctions about dopeness and fatness: rap attitude can be faked, or at least be interpreted as being fake. A Madonna track, for example, can be constructed out of exactly the same groove as a Public Enemy track, but still not be ‘Hip Hop’1. The assessment of the value of a given recording (or performance) is not made in a semiotic vacuum; many contextual factors are taken into account, and such processes of assessment are inherently social. And to this end, it worth reiterating the ‘fuzziness’ of these terms as aesthetic indicators. A definition of what is dope can be shifted to suit a particular context, a particular strategy of exclusion or inclusion.
However, this is not to say that a musicological analysis is not useful. Within a given interpretive community, 'meaning', or 'worth' will be ascribed to particular, identifiable musicological features, and, often, to those features of the 'primary text' (Moore 1993) that tend to escape the notice of conventional musicologies which stress the 'extensional' (Chester 1971), notate-able quantities of pitch and meter, and are less able to attend, for example, to timbrel and 'intensional' qualities, such as those features of voice Barthes subsumed under 'grain' (1977). In subsequent sections I will offer a rough musicological appraisal of two recorded Australian raps released in the space of a year, one of which was interpreted within the Hip Hop scene as being 'authentic', the other as 'sell-out' (or worse, 'cross-over'), in order to demonstrate both that the critical distinctions made can be sheeted home to musicological features, and that in different circumstances, the same musicological features can be 'read' to opposite effect. The artists, in such cases, are engaged in struggles to 'suture' potential readings of their musical texts; in effect, to limit their polysemic vulnerability. I shall return to these arguments below, demonstrating the lengths to which Sound Unlimited, specifically, went to demonstrate the 'authenticity' of their musical text.

And we're back to 'authenticity'. Now, claims to authenticity cannot usefully be assessed in terms of a verifiable set of 'truths', but only in terms of modes of belief. Much of the academic and popular discourse about African-American-derived musical forms can only ever hope to understand the Hip Hop experience of a white, middle class suburban kid in Sydney, circa 1994, as imitative, derivative, false. My attempt has been to understand how it is that those claims to authenticity are made, by such cultural agents, in a mode of belief, and must be taken seriously.

Rap music figures centrally in this construction of belief because certain values and knowledges were held to be immanent in the musical texts. The sections that follow will consider how certain musical texts came to be understood as meaning in this way; how
these recordings or performances are understood as being, in the expression that I heard time and again within the scene, *true to the music*.

**Studying Popular Music**

**The Musicology of Popular Music . . .**


This is not the place to rehearse the debates between 'traditional' musicologists and musicologists of popular music (see, for example, McClary 1987; McClary and Walser 1991; Frith 1987; Moore 1993). However, within the study of popular music, debate about the 'meaning' of popular musics has ranged along a continuum from approaches which privilege the sociological context (eg the work of Simon Frith, and in its most extreme statement, Hennion 1993) to those which advocate an attention to the 'primary' musical texts themselves (Moore 1993). The questions revolve around the relationship of musical texts to their cultural milieu, and the participants in the debates draw upon a variety of disciplinary (and institutional; viz Harris 1991) contexts in order to construct their positions.
In his survey of this territory, Middleton starts to draw together various musicological discourses and those of the sub-cultural theorists emerging from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) in the mid 1970s (1990: 103-126).

The Birmingham melting pot of the leftist 'culturalist' positions of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson, ethnography, western Marxism (particularly the work of Gramsci and the Lacanian-structuralist Althusser), and the later (at least in terms of their impact on the English scene) waves of Barthesian, Kristevan, Foucauldian, Bourdieuan and Baudrillian thought has been somewhat ruthlessly critiqued by Harris (1992).2

Middleton's argument is that two key concepts, specifically those of bricolage (from Lévi-Strauss) and homology (via the ethnomusicological writings of Lomax and Keil), were adopted from anthropological discourse by the marxian-leftist scholars of the BCCCS in their analysis of youth deviance. In youth deviance, as I have suggested, and here in Middleton's words, the Birmingham-centred theorists saw "one of the few remaining sources of popular discontent or protest" (1990: 155). Middleton draws out the influence of approaches (drawn in part from ethnographic and ethnomusicological sources, and from the successive waves of marxian thought) which advocate on the one hand a "tight homology" between a society and its music (his example here is the work of John Blacking, who argued that "Music . . . confirms what is already present in society and culture" in Middleton 155), and those which understand cultural forms as the result of "individual interpretive choices, which, somehow, just happen to result in social and cultural patterns" (this being Middleton's gloss of Clifford Geertz). In terms of the marxian problematic, the debate was argued in terms of the 'relative autonomy' of the (cultural) superstructure from the (politico-economic) base. Gramsci had opened up the possibility of a dialectical, rather than a merely determinant relationship between the political economy and culture; subsequent argument hinged on the exact nature of
this autonomy: just how ‘autonomous’ were cultural forms? What is the nature of the correlation between expressive forms and the underlying structures of a given society?

“The most persuasive position is somewhere between total correlation [Blacking] . . . and meccano-set pragmatism [Geertz]” suggests Middleton, approvingly quoting Lévi-Strauss: “between culture and language [or music] there cannot be no relations at all, and there cannot be one hundred per cent correlation either” (in Middleton 147; the quote is from Lévi-Strauss’s 1972 *Structural Anthropology*). Middleton, through the course of his own work (and citing, among other precedents, Bourdieu’s notion of a “third-order knowledge” negotiating “the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism” (Moore 1993: 123-4; see also Bourdieu 1977: 6; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 10-11), moves towards such an ‘in-between’ position, recapitulating what Bourdieu and Wacquant describe as the “polarized antagonism between symbolic anthropology (Geertz, Schneider, Victor Turner, Sahlins) and Lévi-Straussian structuralism . . . on the one side, and cultural ecology . . . and political-economic and Marxist approaches on the other” *(ibid)*.

Middleton takes as the “classical statement” of the early BCCCS work the collection of essays edited by Tony Jefferson and Stuart Hall and published as *Resistance Through Rituals* in 1976. The ‘culturalist’ position is manifest: culture is understood as “the patterns in which social groups organise their response to their experience” (1990: 156). In responding to the fundamental contradictions of capitalist society, working-class youth produce, in the famous BCCCS formulation, “imaginary solutions to real problems” (Frith and Goodwin 1991: 40). Resistance to a dominating bourgeois culture builds up partly autonomous activity, constituting a class and *generationally-determined* ‘identity’: youth subcultures.

This is where the concepts of *bricolage* and *homology* started to find their way into the analysis. The young people involved in a ‘subculture’ make use of existing cultural materials. Existing
"institutions, values, and objects . . . are taken over, transformed, reinterpreted, inserted into new combinations, combined to form a new style" (Middleton 157). ‘Homology’ is the principle governing the choice, combination and interpretation of objects and values (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 56), operating through the process of *bricolage*, Lévi-Strauss’s term for the improvisatory cultural agent creating new meaning from ‘second-hand’ cultural material.

Now, in the developing body of work on subcultures, these terms came to be used for divergent positions. In Paul Willis’s seminal ethnographic study of biker and hippy subcultures (Willis 1978), participants in the cultures seek out (for example) musical forms which “reflect, resonate, and sum up crucial values, states and attitudes for the social group involved” (Willis n.d. cited in Middleton 160). The range of material to be selected from is, of course, limited by the ‘objective possibilities’ inherent in the given musical form and the historical context. The process of selection operates diachronically; the selection of music resonates with and affects lifestyle, and vice versa: material is drawn into ever tightening homologies through a process of ‘integral circuiting’.

On this analysis, subcultural ‘style’ is understood as being expressive of the given group’s material position in society. The presumption of homologies, or “‘structural resonances’ . . . between the different elements making up the culture, consciousness, and social position of a particular social group” (Middleton 1985: 7), offers the cultural critic a powerful analytical tool, which, Middleton argues, produces a compelling circularity, leading to tendential readings of ‘subcultural’ formations. Middleton takes pains to discuss both Willis’s (1978) and Hebdige’s (1979) seminal texts, pointing out the tendency in both to construct ‘pure’ subcultures, and to overemphasise these subcultures’ opposition to a putative dominant culture, concluding that Willis’s work in particular is “flawed above all by an uncompromising drive to homology”, labouring a supposed internal coherence which is in fact the premise from which his analysis sets out (Middleton 1990: 161).
Now, one of the reasons that I have dwelt on these ways of thinking about youth culture is that it is precisely such a theory which informs the Hip Hop scene which I encountered; this kind of base-superstructure model of cultural processes informing homology theory informed the interpretive practices instituted within that scene. The Hip Hop logic of representation suggests, and engendered a belief in, a form of structural necessity in which a rap, a break-dance, a graffiti piece is a manifestation that could be read, within the interpretive community, as being determined by the immutable, underlying essence of Hip Hop.

Sarah Thornton’s recent positioning of her own work on the English club and rave scene recognises a necessary debt to the work of the Birmingham theorists, while simultaneously offering a pointed critique of that same work. Aside from the important question of the reductive logic of class and resistance which underpins the work, and which leads to what Morris (1988) has recognised as the tendency of subsequent cultural studies to find “pockets of symbolic resistance wherever they look” (Thornton 1996: 93), Thornton offers three points of divergence in her own work from the Birmingham orthodoxy. First, she argues, the concept of ‘sub-culture’ is empirically unworkable. Walser makes a similar argument in reference to Hip Hop, suggesting that “ethnography in industrial societies poses special difficulties: there is no single ‘local’ to be studied; audiences are diverse and linked by mass mediation” (291). This leads directly to Thornton’s second point: that the classic Birmingham studies (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Harris 1978; Hebdige 1979, for example) “tended to banish media and commerce from their definitions of authentic culture” (9, my italics). For Hebdige in 1979 for example, media and commerce are understood as incorporating subcultures back into a hegemonic, parent cultural ‘mainstream’. I have already suggested that the relationship between youth and the media involves far more complex, co-creative feedback loops than analyses based upon simple ‘authentic’ versus ‘hegemonic’ binarisms suggest.
Thornton's third bone of contention with the Birmingham studies is with their focus on synchronic interpretation, at the expense of any understanding of processes of change. Angela McRobbie has similarly written of the tendency of subculture studies in the late 1970s to focus on the "final signifying products" (McRobbie 1993: 411), at the expense of an analysis of the material process of cultural production.

Thornton's approach has been to use the Bourdieuan concepts of cultural capital to understand the process by which "youth imagine their own and other social groups [and] assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass" (1996: 10, my italics). Offering an alternative to vertical models of social structure, Bourdieu's schema, continues Thornton, "locates social groups in a highly complex multi-dimensional space", in which social status is conferred by differential access to various capitals: cultural, economic, social; elaborated into sub-categories such as 'intellectual', 'academic', 'linguistic', 'artistic' and the like. Thornton further extends this elaboration by positing "sub-cultural capital" as that which "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (11).

Below I will take this process a step further with the application of Peircian semiotics, a model of signification and communication which expressly addresses the diachronic axis of the creation of meaning and systems of valuation. Before doing so, however, I briefly want to return to Middleton's earlier response to what he understood, similarly, as the limitations of synchronic models of, in particular, the 'meaning' of particular musicological features for particular 'scenes'.

Middleton's own break with homology theory is based upon, in part, the Gramscian inflection of subculture studies in the latter half of the 1970s. In the late 1970s Hebdigian formation, 'hegemony' is used to refer expressly to an idea of 'dominant ideology', engaged in the ideological struggle to 'win' the superstructural field of cultural production. The 'youth
subcultural' *bricolage* assembles material from amongst the 'straight world' to construct parodic and subversive 'styles' which resist hegemonic world views. Hebdige also introduced a semiological dimension of analysis: 'subcultural style' is seen "less as expressing a group's material position in society than as intervening in existing processes of signification" (Middleton 1990: 164). Middleton maps out, within Hebdige's 1979 text, a movement away from a consideration of what Willis called 'the objective possibilities' determining, in the last instance, the homologous selection of material in the formation of subcultural styles, to a post-structuralist celebration of 'polysemy' (Hebdige 1979: 117), in terms of which teds, punks and skinheads are engaged in a free play of cultural 'deconstruction', generating new meanings, and constituting a kind of avant-garde disrupting ideologically fixed positions. Fight the power.

Once again, we ought to mediate these extreme positions. The constitution of subcultural styles must be determined by more than a simple mechanism of homological generation, but a model based on the promiscuous recombination of cultural material cannot account for the specificity of particular choices. Recognising that the processes by which cultural material is assembled is subject to "multiple determination", rather than responding to "a single expressive need", Middleton's response was to retain a "qualified" sense of homology (Middleton 1985: 6), based upon a principle of 'articulation', a concept taken from the post-Gramscian work of the political sociologist Ernesto Laclau.

"The theory of articulation recognises the complexity of cultural fields", continues Middleton, in order to develop a model of cultural formation in which the key organising principle, in keeping with the gramscian discourse of struggle, is that of the *effort* required to contest existing conventions of meanings:

once particular musical elements are put together in particular ways, and acquire particular connotations, they can be hard to shift. (*op cit* 8)
This is, as I will suggest, a decidedly Peircian piece of analysis: meanings ‘exist’ as the ongoing results of social processes; they are ‘instituted’ over time, by a ‘community of investigators’ (Weber 1987: 13), laying out networks of self-supporting chains or networks of inter-related references without a final transcendental referent. Meanings are not ‘natural’, “determined by some human essence or by the needs of class expression” (Middleton *ibid*), but nor are meanings undetermined. They are, rather, over-determined: meanings are sustained by a constant effort of maintenance, interpretation and institution, directed at arresting the free flow of polysemy. Weber writes:

> [t]he formation and modification of what Peirce described as “habits” depend on collective traditions and institutions through which they transmit and reproduce themselves . . . the institution of specific interpretations thus calls for the interpretation of specific institutions . . .

All languages, all semiotic codes rely upon contingent, spatio-temporally specific closures, without which no communication would be possible. In constructing their model of hegemonics Laclau and Mouffe describe this process as the ‘suturing’ of the ‘field of articulation’: an interest group, they suggest, whether it be a class interest, a gender, or, perhaps, a group of rappers attempting to create and to *direct*, as it were, a local ‘Hip Hop Community’, do so by tying all possible expression (or performance) to a ‘sutured’ set of meanings: a “closed symbolic order” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 88, n1). It is this sense in which I argued, above, that J.U.’s battle with Mick E might be understood as an attempt to ‘hegemonise’ the Sydney Hip Hop scene through a demonstration of their respective sub-cultural capital. The reward for success in this struggle, involved, as I showed, the ‘right’ (or at least the opportunity) to assert a set of meanings; to institute a particular set of interpretations.
Now, we are moving towards a model with which to understand the way in which certain musics can ‘mean’. The next thing that we need is a language with which to describe the music itself. Tricia Rose, for example, isolates flow, layering and rupture as being the defining musicological features of rap. In both the examples below (pp298-309), the dynamic relationships between these dimensions of the sound can clearly be seen at work: the use of the backbeats, the polyrhythmic complexities generated by the layering of drum machine tracks and samples, the construction of hyper-metrical patterns interrupted by regular breaks, the sheer volume of sampled material, and the extraordinary melodico-rhythmic-percussive use of record scratches generates a genuinely complex musical text.

The most thorough-going musicological analysis of rap music to my knowledge, however, is that undertaken (with characteristically pyrotechnical panache) by Robert Walser. Anticipating the trajectory of my own argument here, Walser argues that “only the musical aspects of rap can invest [the rapper’s] words with the affective force that will make people want to wake up” (1995: 291). Aside from the general musicological imperative to look “beyond the vocals” (Walser 1993), no small part of the argument here is that the massive volume of rap lyrics (Adler’s 1991 estimate is that a rap track usually contains four to five times the number of words of a song of comparable length) constitutes fertile ground for academic and popular analysis, producing a skewed emphasis on a demonstration of “rap’s verbal complexity and the cultural significance of its lyrics” (Walser 1995: 291). I encountered the intellectualist bias towards textuality that Walser is addressing here: it was frequently assumed that I would be primarily interested in the words of the raps. J.U. told me one day, for example, that “it’s all about the words, man”. Although I don’t want to suggest that he was simply telling me what I wanted to hear, there was a sense that it was important for J.U. to impress
me with the value of (the 'cultural capital' of) his practices. The words were important to J.U., but so was the flow... the affective thump of the bass.\textsuperscript{3}

After addressing a series of conventional musicological (and popular) positions which seek to define rap as 'not music' (and with which I am not concerned), Walser goes on to explain how rap compositional practices generate this affective power. Acknowledging first that "the lyrics and reception of rap cannot be detached from the music" (Walser 1996: 291), and later the dangers of adopting too formalistic an approach to the 'meaningfulness' of individual (musical) notes, Walser sketches out the "solid but richly conflicted polyrhythmic environment" of Public Enemy's "groove" and the "polyrhythmic flexibility" of the rap (296). The interaction between these polyrhythms produces a "non-teleological... complex present... containing enough energy and richness that progress seems moot" (296).

From this consideration of Public Enemy's 'primary text' (Moore 1993), Walser is able to concur with Toop's (1991) archaeology of an "explicit" lineage to be drawn from the verbal and musical styles of present day rap to "African music itself", finding in Public Enemy's music "the clash of rhythms" identified by one scholar as "the cardinal principle of African music" (297). However, this is immediately qualified by Walser's observation that "to trace the origins of a stylistic feature is not to account for its attractions and functions in later contexts" (298).

So, as we move towards understanding how rap music was understood by those who made it in Sydney, circa 1994, let's go back to that ethnographic context.

**How to make a rap recording, Sydney, 1994**

In "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Music", his response to Walter Benjamin's famous 'Work of Art' essay, Adorno offers this thumbnail sketch of the fetishistic listener, that
“eager [male] person who leaves the factory and ‘occupies’ himself with music in the quiet of his bedroom . . .”:

He is shy and inhibited, perhaps has no luck with girls, and wants in any case to preserve his own special sphere. He seeks this as a radio ham . . . He patiently builds sets whose most important parts he must buy ready-made, and scans the air for shortwave secrets, though there are none (1992: 292-3)

We’re familiar with DJ E.S.P. of Illegal Substance. As 18 year old Steve Petridis, E.S.P. works in a chicken shop in Redfern, not a factory. In his bedroom he has a set of keyboards and an MPC 60 sampler. E.S.P. is what is called a beat freak, perhaps similar to the fetishistic listener described by Adorno, patiently building his set(-up), and scanning not the airwaves, but second hand record shops for secrets of all lengths: long, short, but all, in the Hip Hop argot, phat. These are the beats; the grooves and breaks which he plucks from the vinyl with his MPC 60, slows down, speeds up, loops and layers over, mixing up hard core tracks for his DJ Mick E. And where Adorno dismisses the futile effort of the ham radio operator’s search for secrets where there are none, for E.S.P. there are secrets aplenty, in the form of precious beats from thirty years of back catalogues, deleted, re-released, hocked, borrowed, or pilfered records.

And there are plenty of professional secrets: once discovered, a beat’s source is carefully guarded. On air at 2-SER, being interviewed by Miguel, E.S.P. was (playfully) asked where he got his beats:

ESP: Um . . .
Miguel: You’re not going to tell us are you?
ESP: I made them myself. [Laughter]

On Illegal Substance’s first album release, “Off da Back of a Truck”, a production credit refers to “The Hospital of Hits”. Miguel asked E.S.P. where this studio was:
ESP: Ah, my bedroom. [Laughter]

... then offering an elaboration on this which again takes on Adorno’s sketch:

E.S.P.: Yeah, a lot happens in there. [In his bedroom].

Miguel was running a radio show, so seized the opportunity to make a joke:

M: What kind of surgery goes on in there most . . . I won’t say nights . . . days? I don’t want to know what goes on there at night . . .

And, sidestepping the question of what Adorno coyly called “luck with girls”, E.S.P. answered

... just beat creating and tunes and that . . .

Jokes aside, what do we have here? In all seriousness, what we looking at is bedrooms. Many scholars have remarked upon the distinction drawn, in African-American urban cultures, between the (feminised) private sphere of work and the (masculinised) public sphere of play. Writers such as Abrahams and Szwed (1983: 13), Folb (1980) and Leary (1990: 12-13; 22-23) have used such a distinction to reflect upon the public, communitarian development of the African-American oral practices (‘signifyin’, the dozens, etc), the precursors to ‘rap’, ‘on the street’. Such oral practices, on this account, are public performance, through which individuals accrue prestige and social status.

I have already shown how the discourse of ‘the street’ informs the Sydney Hip Hop Scene. The ‘street’ is coded as ‘the real’: to claim to be in touch with the street is to claim access to (literally) unmediated knowledge, and to be able to ‘represent’ that truth. The expression “code of the streets”, for example, would often accompany the performance of a rap. Accounts of the early days of Hip Hop Culture in Sydney and Brisbane often include references to public spaces, none more revealingly than one Brisbane writer’s
account of the early attempts to reproduce in that city a 'street life' on the model of the street life (imaginary) of North America. Once again the reference here is to Malcolm McLaren's "Buffalo Gals" film clip:

It came out over that Christmas period, um, Rock Steady Crew, Malcolm McLaren and all that sort of stuff grew up and came out, every kid was trying to learn to break-dance, um, it was just something different to do, everyone sort of took to it, um, everyone would go to the city and hang out and from there, um, it sort of died out...

The urban geography of Australian cities is simply not conducive to hanging out: rapping, in Australia, is something that starts off in, and often stays in, suburban bedrooms.

Def Wish Cast's lyrics at one point describe the experience of being woken up by one's parents to be told that you are "rapping in your sleep". DJ Vame told me of the hours he spent locked away in his bedroom, practising his DJ skills; cutting, mixing, scratching, sampling; illustrating his story by breaking into his mother's voice: "what are you doing in there?", and then laughing. On another occasion, I thanked The Monk for a particularly entertaining freestyle session at The Lounge Room. "No trouble, mate," he told me. "If I wasn't doin' it here I'd be doing it in my bedroom anyway." Mick E. explained that:

I started writing rhymes in my room, which was amazing because I didn't know enough about the culture, and they were alright you know, made them on my little portable CD tape thing and played them to Mum and she goes "it's nice dear, it's nice, just do your homework boy" and now [I] kept writing, persisted with it and then mum started saying "yeah the lyrics are quite good I like what you're saying" and so they sort of encouraged me a bit more, made me want to write more. [I] kept writing
Blaze cut, pasted, laid out and wrote *Vapors* on his bedroom floor. When I asked J.U. what the new Hip Hop shop The Lounge Room will look like, he replied "probably like Blaze's bedroom".

**Phat beats . . .**

Here, then, is Hip Hop: rap music, a music recorded in bedrooms, while parents are kept in the dark downstairs. DJ Vame lived with his parents. He had no musical training, in fact argued that musical training ruins "the Hip Hop thing". Too much technical musical knowledge, he suggested, creates 'cross-over'—you get synthesisers and, worse, real instruments.

Vame worked in a manner that he describes as being 'true to the music'. This means that he based his compositional and recording practice upon the what he called "the original Hip Hop instruments: two turn-tables and a microphone". Well, he also used a sampler, and a drum machine: but even these devices bestowed an aura of authenticity upon a Hip Hop product: the apparently distinctive sound of the famous Roland 808 drum machine was as much a mark of authenticity in Hip Hop circles as the Hammond organ is for Motown, or the Moog organ for particular New Wave pop genres (Goodwin 1991: 265).

Composing his tracks on software (worth around $1200) running on a simple Atari home computer, Vame had complete technical mastery over his sounds, isolating waves, speeding them up, slowing them down, inverting them with the assurance of a Bach tricking up a fugue. The first step involved the selection of a "BPM" (Beats Per Minute), constructing a big bottom end (he makes a contradistinction to rock's treble-y sound): large, flattened-out bass tones. In describing the desired sound, Vame shook his tummy with both hands, demonstrating the effect of a phat bass. Another producer told me about the problems of mixing up the fat, almost atonal, sub-sonic bass notes: when he sent his tapes off to be mastered, they come back cleaned up—the word he
used was ‘sweetened’. Vame talked about the recording of Def Wish Cast’s “Knights of the Underground Table”. The sound engineer in whose garage studio they were working would constantly mix down the bass, and sessions would turn into the classic rock’n’roll mixing scenario, with Vame sneaking his bass levels up whenever he could, only to later be played a tape that has been mixed when they (Vame et al) are absent, and being told that this is the version they had agreed on.

E.S.P. describes the whole compositional/recording process in similar terms:

Making a track, what I do is I come up with the beat first drum beats, drum machine. I just like, get the beats, programme them in . . .

His rapper, Mick E continues:

when Steve makes his beats, you can hear what the song will become, if it's gonna be a nice happy song, a slow, fast song, just by the speed of the song . . .

The next step is to “muck around with the keyboard, come up with a bass line”.

To make a ‘hard core’ track, he creates “dark sounds, that’s all it is, the low basslines . . .The heavy bass, big bass, slow, heavy.”

The process is guided, he explains, by feeling. And the metaphor here is iconic, rather than merely figurative. E.S.P. again:

It moves you. The hard core sound, it’s like it really moves you. It’s like “wow”, you really like freak out over it. You just hear it and it’s like, “yeah, that’s good”. If it makes you kick straight away it’s good, if it doesn’t, start again.

This compositional process is improvisational:

I don’t like to plan like okay, this song’s gonna sound like this, so that . . . I don’t decide on the music I’m gonna make. I just know that it’s gonna be heavy, and
it’s gonna kick. And if it doesn’t I’ll change it to make it kick.

Once the rhythmic fabric of the backing track is set down, the next step is to “get a few sounds and samples going through there”.

The samples come from literally anywhere. Milk crates of second hand records. Parents’ collections. Television, rented videos. I watched another DJ, WizDM from the Christian rap crew The Brethren Incorporated, work his way through literally dozens of old jazz and blues records one afternoon, skimming from track to track, looking for a loop, a break beat. He explained his recording process, calling it ping-ponging: on a decidedly low tech four-track mixing rig cobbled together from an electronics store, he would work for hours, reducing three tracks to one, and then repeating the process, layering up vast soundscapes of samples, piling on top of each other. It’s not hard to ‘clean-up’ sounds, but, critically, the sample must retain the trace of its source—the snap, crackle, hiss of old vinyl proving not only the authenticity of the source, but the authenticity of the process by which the source was taken, appropriated, recomposed.

... dope rhymes.

The next step in E.S.P.’s process involves talking with his rapper, his ‘partner in rhyme’: “I call him up . . .” he says, gesturing to Mick, who takes up the narrative, and together, they explain how a rap came about:

He goes “What do you think of this beat?” and I go “Yeah, awright, that’s cool. that sounds like a song about . . . summertime” Boom! I wrote a song about summer.

E.S.P.:

It’s like we got a song, “Summer Holiday”: it’s like a cruising song, it’s laid back, and really heavy and funky like summer, hanging out in your car, cruising about and
it's sort of the like feeling you get out of that, so we wrote about it, you know, what's summer like?

Mick:

He made the beat, and he played it to himself for three hours straight, just the beat, just that loop going through because it was such a . . . so relaxing, and he rings me up and he's just so mellow, going . . . talking about his beat . . .

E: Hey . . . Didn't even have to have a cone [ie smoke marijuana]

M: Like, "check it out, man", "Yeah, cool" very summertime feeling, I wrote all my feelings about summer.

Writing raps was a full time business for these guys, keeping notebooks crammed with rhymes, couplets, similes, metaphors (these are the terms they use). And while some rymers prefer to improvise and others carefully craft their lines, all share the idea that rhyming is something that you do compulsively: the metaphor of addiction recurs: "I can't help it, man" (bombers use exactly the same language to explain their apparently uncontrollable need to tag up any and every surface). "My mind is infected with rhyming words" raps Def Wish. Sleek the Elite, a rhymer who was emerging in the Sydney scene just as I was wrapping up my research would speak of his obsessive need to "come up with similes" as he drove around the city in his work as an air-conditioning repairman.

Rappers learn their 'skills' by rapping along to favourite artists, learning lines by rote. I asked Mick E whether he studied poetry. "Nah," he sneered, dismissively, before correcting himself: "... well I do study poetry ... but it's got nothing to do with it" (see note 5).

Writing a rap can be hit or miss:

if it doesn't start off right, I have to stop, and like a take a deep break and start again, but it's got to be ... if it starts off right, I can keep flowing, you know, keep
going for a long time, but you’ve just gotta be in the mood
explains Mick. But “you can’t just take two lines and go ‘that will go well in a song’. You’ve got to write . . .” and E.S.P. finishes off the thought:

You’ve got to write a story . . . especially if you go out one night and something happens, and you spin out ‘wow’ . . . it’s like it’s all there and just waits and you just write about it.

So, the critical features of this compositional practice, as understood by those engaged in it, are, first, its grounding in a corporeal listening practice: the music must feel right, it must kick, be fat/phat. The music must bear the trace of its composition. Samples must sound like samples; the grain of the source must be retained. Samples can supposedly be drawn from anywhere, but particular sub-cultural capital will, inevitably, differentially accrue to various sources, deemed as being worthy of being sampled. This process will in turn be determined by the adduction of a particular genealogy: hence the recent Hip Hop experiments with jazz sources, ‘authenticated’ by the discourse of an historical continuity connecting, for example, be-bop to Hip Hop. Vame told me about one day teasing the rappers from Def Wish Cast by playing them a track he had mixed using a sample from a 1970s pop hit which he referred to as “that wack shit ‘Oh What A Night’”. Only after they had started to accommodate to the idea did he “reveal” to them that he had, in fact, been “tricking them”. The point is that Vame almost got away with it through his own institutionalised status: there is no ‘formal’ code which operates to exclude the track in question from the bounds of Hip Hop, only a continually re-negotiated consensus that is always open to challenge.

Sampling is also governed by a quite explicit code of ethics, explained as follows by DJ E.S.P:

Well, like, rap samples rap, cool, they don’t mind. If rap sampled off someone else, they’d sue, alright, so if

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someone else samples rap, what goes around comes around.

So, it is not alright for Madonna to sample Public Enemy, even though Public Enemy have long since defended their right to use anything they want, sustaining their ethical position on the grounds of a perceived ethno-political solidarity with their sources. Of course looping in and around these discourses of authenticity we also find the standard rock and roll narratives of the sell-out (see Maxwell 1994b).

The successful rap track will also, according to Mick E, “tell a story”. The story will be directly, mimetically related to ‘real shit that happens’. Rappers simply recount what they see. This relationship to reality supports the discourse of representing, and was offered to me by Mick E as a defining feature of ‘hard core’. For Mick E, in addition, this grounding of the content of a rap in reality ensured that his practice as a rapper was not merely imitative of North American rappers, as I have shown already. This is one of the guarantors of authenticity: if the rap describes a ‘real event that took place on ‘the street’, then obviously, self-evidently, it is authentic (see Maxwell 1994a).

And although the ‘phat beats dope rhymes’ binarism suggests a strict division of the musical text—the affective thrall of the music versus the rational appeal of the lyrics—it’s not that simple (see Walser 1995). Another rapper describes North American rhymer NAS’s style:

they [the ‘mainstream’] wouldn’t understand that, that it’s butter-smooth rhymes and that, that stuff is just like originality and it’s just like it’s in its own sense, you know what I mean they can’t deal with that but it’s like the underground, the underground know that, that NAS is like a . . . this guy is so smooth and he’s got rhymes that are like he’s dropping science or like they keep with it, you know.

The rap is butter-smooth; rhymers flow. It is an acquired taste: a listener must enculturate themselves, undergo what Feld calls
"interpretive" moves (1994: 163-4) in order to make distinctions (Bourdieu 1984), to be able to tell bad from good. Even I, after a period of months, was able to not only (generally) be able to make the right distinctions, carefully weighing up the features of a track I was being played, locating it geographically and temporally through my burgeoning knowledge of the field . . . but I was able to have my own favourites.

To get a feel for phatness, though, we'll have to listen to some music.

**Listening to Hip Hop**

The 'meaning' of a given rap track, then, can only be grasped through an investigation of the historically contextualised, sociological processes by which meanings are 'articulated' to particular musicological features, these processes being determined in part by the play of interests, negotiations and struggles as individuals attempt to enrol others to their 'version' of social being. My interest, for example, has not been in the 'roots' of Hip Hop except insofar as these roots are adduced by people in the scene to support their various claims to Hip Hop legitimacy, or where they constitute a consensual narrative or tradition. In this respect, the 'traditions' of Hip Hop, the historical continuities of rapping, for example, should be understood, in the present context, in epistemological terms, rather than ontologically. That is, I do not understand the rappers of Def Wish Cast, for example, in terms of their participation in a continuous cultural phenomenon, the nature of which can be diagnosed through an attention to the formal features of those practices, although this is the story that they themselves tell about these practices. Rather, the narrative of that 'tradition' is a knowledge, or set of knowledges, that circulates and is productive of these practices, and of the understanding, or interpretation of these practices.

What is at stake in these struggles is not merely 'power', although,
of course, a certain power does accrue, for example, to J.U. in his (however fleetingly) successful closure of the Hip Hop symbolic order. What is at stake is the having of one’s own affective state, of being able to understand one’s pleasure, as Zizek would have it (1994). Of being able to offer an account of, and to give a name to “one’s thing”: the “real thing”. I will now examine how it is that this ‘real thing’, given the name ‘Hip Hop’, is understood as being expressed in the music of Hip Hop.

I want to turn to two recordings released in Sydney during the period of my research. Both were released by crews who have figured prominently in my account so far. The first, from Sound Unlimited, was greeted with disdain within the Hip Hop scene, while the second, by Def Wish Cast, was acclaimed. My ‘reading of’—really a ‘listening to’, or ‘feeling of’—these recorded musical texts will be informed by theoretical perspectives which understand the ‘meaning’ of such artefacts in terms of on-going processes of interpretation, of the processual articulation of meaning to particular musicological features in the context of received or produced genealogies and narratives, and the predication of an underlying cultural essence upon these arrived at, instituted, interpretations.

I will then generalise this discussion to suggest the means by which other practices and artefacts are drawn into these institutionalised interpretive frames; how aesthetic frames of reference are carried over into these other practices, creating, rather than being generated by, a contiguity, homology and iconicity between these practices.

Finally, I will then move beyond, or perhaps below, this level of analysis: from ‘the music’, from the interpretations and meanings that inform, are adduced, are held to adhere to, are debated, assumed, articulated and otherwise circulate around this music, to ‘the groove’: the dimension of affect and the body.
Caveat: I am no musicologist, and am unable to offer as technical a musicological analysis as that undertaken by Walser (1995), whose work on Public Enemy I have taken here as a rough guide for my own reading/listening/experience of these musical texts. However, my accounts of these texts is guided by ethnographic considerations, and I find myself more in sympathy with Hennion’s argument (1983); that music can only be analysed ‘as received’, for reasons that should already be clear, and, if not, will become more so as my consideration of these musical texts proceeds.

My consideration of the musical texts here is guided by an ethnographically-informed consideration of salience, by what features of the music are understood as being meaningful by the interpretative community engaged in producing, receiving and negotiating meanings in and around this music, rather than an attempt to construct an exhaustive musicological analysis. All that having been said, I nonetheless take note of Moore’s call for attention to what he calls ‘the primary text’ of popular musical forms (1993): it is certainly to move towards an understanding of how musical forms function in order to understand how meanings can be articulated to them. Moore’s introductory text, for these purposes, and notwithstanding its problematic identification of the ‘primary’ text with the recorded, rather than the performed musical text, is indispensable for the neophyte musicologist.

I will offer, then, a limited account of the musicological features of these recorded texts, followed by an account of the articulation of value and meaning to those particular features. The varied reception of these recordings by the Sydney Hip Hop audience involves a range of considerations operating outside that ‘primary’ musical text. Judgements about the value and authenticity are informed by a number of factors, and a range of knowledges about the performers and the circumstances of the production of the musical text as well as the music itself, and particularly, in reference to the music, a timbrel quality informing the recordings.
in their totality, rather than an attention to specific musicological features or systems at work within them.

I am leading towards a key figuration that dominated questions of the aesthetic, epistemological, semantic, and, fundamentally, the ontological grounding of Hip Hop within the Sydney Scene: the expression hard core, and the related notion of a ‘truth’ in the music; that somebody, or something, can be true to the music.

**Sound Unlimited’s “Postcard From the Edge of the Underside”**

I’ve already introduced Sound Unlimited (p58ff). After supporting Public Enemy and Run DMC on a couple of Australian tours in late 1980s and early 1990s, S.U. landed a deal with Sony-Columbia in 1991-2. The massive recording and distribution contract was a breakthrough, and much was made by Sound Unlimited of the faith placed by Sony/Columbia in the community which SU claimed to represent (see Maxwell and Bambrick 1994).

The deal, however, involved S.U. working with some in-house producers in Boston. The Antune brothers, apparently, listened to the SU demos, and worked up the backing tracks on sophisticated recording equipment, using live instruments, before the rappers even got to the studios. The album, in keeping with the self-marginalising discourse of Hip Hop, was called “A Postcard From the Edge of the Underside”.

Track six, “Kickin’ to the Underside”, starts off with five sampled voice grabs, punctuated by a percussive, synthesised chord and a DJ record scratch. The first is taken from an Australian pop hit from the 1970s (“Eagle Rock”, by Daddy Cool), a recording that had been revived in the early 1990s. A voice, lifted from the introduction to Daddy Cool’s track, intones, an echo added to the sample, “now listen -isten -isten -isten. . .”, seguing into a second, similarly echoed sample, and a third, the three combining to construct the sentence “now listen to this song” and the namecheck
"unlimited". The samples are crystal clear: the barest trace of the
guitar figure and handclap beat from the Daddy Cool song, for
example, are audible in the musical background; each is arrayed
distinctly in the sonic space, located in clearly differentiated
spaces, left, right and foreground. The sound quality is good: the
vocal tones are warm, resonant.

The fourth sample is the voice of Flavor Flav, the mercurial jester-
rapper figure from Public Enemy7, instantly recognisable to any
listener familiar with rap music:

That's right, from the Sound Unlimited Posse boy-ee . . .

and the final sample is an American-accented voice announcing
the crew’s name: "Sound Un-lim-it-ed".

Immediately following that voice, the backing track kicks in: a
drum machine and a ('live') slapped bass setting up a brisk, funky
beat, in common time, at a punchy 114 beats per minute (bpm).
Each measure is organised around the bass riff, which, played live
in the studio, sets up a hyper-metrical movement (Moore 1993:
39) across two- and four-measure groups. The drum track is
dynamically even; a snare and high hat ride the beat, with a kick
drum hitting the second and fourth (back) beats.

The crew's three rappers take it in turns to deliver lines 'perkily',
not identifiably Australian-accented, but nor distinctly American
voices. T-Na, the female rapper, actually allows her voice to sing in
sections of the chorus. Elsewhere, her voice catches and skips,
almost playfully. All three vocals are timbrally 'colourful', and
tonally broad, although the colouring of the male raps tends to be
derived from a rhythmic observance of the emphasised backbeat,
which they 'hit'.

The mix of vocals and backing track conforms to the standard pop-
rock model: the vocals are foregrounded, placed 'in front of' the
music. The drums, particularly the high range snares and high-
hats, are perhaps slightly more prominent than might be expected,
but the bottom end is not particularly emphasised.
When rapper Kode Blue rhymes "faster on the C U T . . . ", a rhythmic record scratch provides an iconic reference, placed high above the musical mix. A measure later, the rhythmic flow is broken; the drum machine and bass drop out, replaced by a percussive scratch and synthesizer sound as T-Na raps

... from the very first hook line and ...

... and I can't imagine a listener without the cultural capital to anticipate the next word. T-Na's syncopated delivery slides up the scale, anticipating a return to the tonic root falling on the final word: the music and the lyrics here combine again to effect a musico-semantic closure. After a brief moment of suspension, all three rappers, delaying their delivery just behind the strict measure of the beat, hit the word . . .

... sinker!

... the drum machine and bass kick in again, and the flow is reasserted. The rhymers exchange lines again, until Kode Blue's final rhyme, where, once again, there is a small suspension, a kind of break-let, the next rapper falling in just behind the beat to once again, effect a musico-semantic closure. The chorus follows, a sampled flute figure from the early 1980s Australian hit "Down Under" by Men At Work.

The track proceeds through a standard pop-rock form: choruses and verses exchanged three times, a middle-eight break, another
verse and chorus, a coda and chorus fade-out, the metrical and sonic pattern throughout complicated only by the addition of piano and horn samples and T-Na’s sung track through the chorus.

Def Wish Cast’s “Knights of the Underground Table”

Around the same time as the release of Sound Unlimited’s album, Def Wish Cast released their “Knights of the Underground Table”, recorded in a suburban garage studio on a four track, with no ‘live’ instruments. Earlier releases on cassette and vinyl had recouped costs, and the crew was able to afford a small run of compact discs, distributed by Random Records. 1200 copies were printed, in all. DJ Vame produced the recordings, using turntables, a collection of old records, a video recorder and rented b-grade horror movies. I will take the track “A.U.S.T. Down Under Comin’ Upper” as my example here.

The track starts with a gritty sample, complete with a mass of background static. Across a low level synthesised orchestral tone, generically identifiable as being taken from a horror movie soundtrack, we hear a male voice

and unlikely to bring anyone down there so . . .

interrupted by a melodramatic chord, and a screaming female voice

no . . . No . . . NO . . . AAARGH!!!

The male voice completes the sentence

. . . we’re coming up.

Abruptly, the sonic ambience of the recording changes: the static hiss that has informed the samples to this point disappears, and a synthesised drum track kicks in at about 104 bpm. The rhythm is a simple common time, and conforms to a standard rock backbeat structure, the accent falling on the second (strongest) and fourth
(second strongest) beats, while the first and third beats are weaker, the latter being the weakest, thus:

1 2 3 4
3rd strongest strongest weakest 2nd strongest

The second and fourth beats of each measure (the backbeats) are full notes, relatively uncomplicated drum sounds. The first and third beats are paired eighth notes, the third complicated by a range of drum sounds, and the breaking down of the eighth notes into stuttering sixteenths, anticipating the final beat. As Walser points out, the layering up of different drum sounds, and the ability of the drum programmer to minutely anticipate or fall in behind the strict pulse, generates idiosyncratic dynamics within measures (1995: 295). The complication of the third beat constructs the particular momentum of this rhythmic structure, shared by many Hip Hop tracks, throwing the measure forward into the final beat, which, although it does not carry the dynamic emphasis of the second beat, is a single, sustained note. After the busy-ness of the third beat, the fourth beat is broader, fuller, and ‘feels’ longer; it is this beat towards which the energetic drive of each measure is directed, on which the semantic content of the raps tends to be resolved, and on which the other rappers tend to ‘punch’ into the rhymes. Thus, in broad terms, the second beat of each measure provides the impetus, and the final beat constitutes a point of arrival.

The drum track here is muffled, somewhat muddy and almost jangly, not placed anywhere in particular in the soundscape. For the first measure, this beat kicks alone, establishing the metrical figure that will sustain the rest of the track. Into the second, third and fourth measures, across which a record scratch is panned across from left to right and back again each measure, the turntables used as a featured solo instrument, developing a theme, rather than as a percussive or rhythmic fill. At the end of this ‘solo’, there is a short break: once again, the tonal, ambient surface
of the musical text is disrupted as the drum machine is mixed right down to the barest trace for a single measure, and into the gap opened up in the rhythmic surface, a deep male voice is sampled saying “down-under”.

Abruptly, into the brief pause tumbles a cacophony of voices, samples and drums. A mass of male voices chant the chorus “A.U.S. Down Under Comin’ Upper”. The drum machine fills back in, and at the end of each chanted phrase, a synthesised orchestral horror movie chord stutters, sequenced to effect a braking, hiccupping sound that opens up over two beats to fade under the next vocal repetition. A rhythmic scratch and a garbled vocal sample accompanies the chorus. “A.U.S. Down Under Comin’ Upper” is repeated twice over four measures, the vocals, falling within the first and second measures, interacting in a kind of antiphonic dialogue with the samples in the second and fourth measures. When the chorus is repeated after the first rapped verse, this antiphonic dialogue becomes explicit: a sampled female (American) voice responds to each repetition of “A.U.S. Down Under Comin’ Upper” with the words “I need something Hip Hop you know what I’m talking about?”

The tonal shape of the vocal delivery is informed by the rhythmic structure of the measure note above, thus:

1 2 3 4
3rd strongest strongest weakest 2nd strongest

A.U.S. Down Under Comin’ Up — per

The syllable ‘down’ spreads out into a long, broad, bent vowel; the characteristically Australian diphthong, the final syllable fading away both in volume and down the tonic scale. The syllable ‘up’ on the final beat is followed by the plosive release of “per”, pronounced as “paaah”, trailing over into the next measure, over the top of the vocal sample.
The last repetition fades into the first verse. The other two rappers actually start the verse off, calling "who?", and Def Wish's delivery barrels in over this syllable. As he starts to rap, the drum pattern is augmented by a rhythmic, trebly, repeated guitar and bass riff, sampled and looped, which rapidly becomes the rhythmic hook sustaining the rest of the track. The guitar figure is identical in rhythmic shape to the drum pattern: two eighth notes on the first beat, and a full note on the second, several tones higher than the initial notes. The pattern is repeated on the third and fourth measures, except that the eighth note doublet is broken down into a funk-rhythm: the drum track has clearly been developed from this sample.

The vocal itself is unclear, textured into the rest of the mix. Def Wish's voice is ragged, rough, raw: a guttural scraping sound, and the other two rappers punch key words ("true to the music", for example). When he refers to his DJ, a record scratch falls in over the top of the mix. Halfway through the verse, there is a break in the rhythmic flow. The guitar figure, having been established as the device driving the composition forward, disappears, and Def Wish's rap trails off in intensity and drops down the scale into the resulting void, rapping "but they continue to live off imported songs". The next handful of lines is delivered into a sparser music-scape: a back-beat on the upper end of the drum machine kit, against which the rapper's voice is contrasted in high relief. Def Wish's voice has a distinctive epiglottal rasp, catching on each syllable. All three rap namecheck "Def Wish Cast", and the beat and the guitar loop return, now, after their absence, feeling even more dynamic and driving than before, and Def Wish launches into a regga-rap delivery for the final three lines, a climactic, breathless rush that delivers the track into a repetition of the frenetic chorus.

A basic dynamic of flow and arrest informs the rest of the track, with the alternative removal and reinstatement of the guitar and bass loop being the principle device used. However, as rapper Die C leaps into his verse, a new element is introduced into the sonic
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

landscape: a deep, fuzzy drawn out synthesised bass tone spreading out under the mix, metabolic in its intensity. Operating as a rhythmic counterpoint slightly outside the strict metre of the track, it falls into the mix like a vast rubber ball failing to bounce, deflating on striking the bottom end of the soundscape, at the lowest threshold of audibility.

It is in regard to this last musicological feature that the recording of “Knights of the Underground Table” is particularly interesting. In performance, this bass tone is extraordinary. I would watch the sound, the fuzzy colour of the bass-tone shimmer across the broad backwards and forwards undulations of the woofers in the speaker stacks, driven by the high quality Digital Audio Tape (DAT) backing tracks. The CD release of the same tracks lacked this degree of resolution, resulting in a surprisingly trebly sound. The CD, as a result, sounds extraordinarily ‘noisy’, with very little tonal dynamic in the mix: the mass of samples, synthesiser tracks, drum machine tracks, DJ scratches, vocal grabs and so on tend to blend together. The dynamic of the recording, as a result, derives more from the selective interruption of this conglomerate sound, rather than the placement of distinct musical parts in sonic space.

Both these tracks conform to standard pop-rock formulations: each is less than four minutes long (the Sound Unlimited track slightly shorter at 3’ 44”, while the Def Wish Cast comes in at 3’ 55”); each uses a brief series of samples to lead into a standard verse-chorus structure, with a middle eight ‘break’ section. Def Wish Cast fill out the middle eight with a name-checking call and response of outer-western Sydney suburbs, while the Sound Unlimited track moves into a complete break-down, complete with a cow-bell backbeat, piano sample and a voice interjecting “oh yeah!”, generically more in keeping with what Stephens (1991) calls mid-1980s “rock’n’roll rap”.

Def Wish Cast organise their verses around individual rappers delivering their rhymes while the other two rappers punch into key words, usually on the backbeats; all join in on the chorus. The
individual rappers' contributions are informed by their own ability to sustain a flow, a key feature of which is their capacity to maintain their physical energy and capacity, in very simple terms, to not run out of breath. All three raps are reedy and scratching in quality: tonally, the vocals are in the upper register, using head resonators rather than deeper, reverberative chest sounds, and a particular mobilisation of the oral apparatus: in performance, they grimace and snarl, lips curling mouths pursed and stretched. All three use a lot of syllables, particularly in Def Wish's 'ragga-rap' sections, in which he interpolates extra plosive syllables to trip from word to word. The voices are frequently strained and hoarse (Def Wish in particular would often lose his voice, explaining to me that he was trying to use his diaphragm to punch the sounds out, but felt that he couldn't get the same effect). The reaching, shouting quality of these vocals was coded, within the scene, as being 'authentic', as signifying 'Aussie-ness', and a specifically western suburbs common speech. John Shepherd has identified a similar valorisation in popular music forms of the high-pitched, straining male voice (1987: 166-7). Here, the rough, sand-paper grain of these voices was understood as not merely signifying authenticity, but as being, iconically, authentic. A particular metaphysics of the voice as self-presences informed these understandings (cf Derrida 1977): the suffering voice is experienced by both performer and listener as (because suffering, because felt) 'real'. Other far Western Sydney crews, most noticeably Campbelltown's 046, pushed this vocal style even further, delivering shrieking, screeching raps, their voices leaping up into keeningly high registers.

In the case of Def Wish Cast, the valorisation of this male voice is, on their account, uncomplicated by any attempt to emulate 'blackness'. Indeed, the crew explicitly denies any suggestion that their work is in any way derivative of African-American musics (recall Ser Reck, above, p85). Def Wish took pains to point out that his style is influenced by London ragga-rap rather than North American rap, conceding the Afro-Caribbean 'roots' of that scene,
but carefully distancing himself from charges of imitation, or of
subjection to a putative American cultural imperialism.

The Sound Unlimited track involves a more atomistic breaking up
of the verse: rappers exchange clauses, rather than verses. The
voices are smoother, more colourful, as I noted, both in terms of
tone and timbre. Where Def Wish Cast generate vocal dynamics
through an inflection of the speed and syllabic volume of delivery
and the energetic stressing of syllables, the vocalists from Sound
Unlimited use a range of tonal and timbrel inflections to create
both musical and semantic differences. This results in a more
subtle, inflectioned, 'colourful' vocal, with each rapper being
distinctively identifiable in the mix.

Walser's analysis of Public Enemy rapper Chuck D's careful
negotiation of metre, as he sets up counter-rhythms and clashes in
the rhythmic fabric of P.E.'s sound suggests a rapper of
extraordinary sophistication. None of the Australian rappers I
have described here approach this level of complexity in their
relation to the beat. Although idiosyncratic relationships to the
beat are discernible as rappers pull or push against the strict
pulse, in general, the dynamics, as I have suggested, are generated
by more conventional manipulations of volume, register, and
tempo. Semantic and vocal emphasis falls regularly on the second
and fourth beats of each measure; this is also where the other
rappers, in the case of Def Wish Cast, punch in.

**Authenticity**

For Def Wish Cast and Sound Unlimited, the determination of the
authenticity of their sound, their recording, their practices and
performances is paramount. The musicological features identified
in the tracks above can best be understood in terms of a series of
attempts to assert the 'authenticity' of the performers, where this
'authenticity' is understood as an absolute horizon of being, of
experience: to ask any of these people why they must be authentic is to be met with incomprehension.

The discussion above of the Def Wish Cast rappers' own accounts of the relationship of their music and raps to an originary black musical tradition leads to a more general consideration of the cultural genealogies and contexts of these musicological features. As Walser points out, the explicit links that can be made between the musicological features of Hip Hop, the verbal form of rap and musicological and oral traditions in African-American cultures do not "account for [their] attractions and functions in later contexts" (Walser 1995: 298). The continuity between the sub-Saharan griot and Chuck D can be, and is, argued frequently; Toop (1991), Gates (1988), Gilroy (1993) and Rose (1994) all offer variations on the theme. My concern with such accounts is that they start to fix certain meanings: Rose suggests, for example, that

[r]ap music uses repetition and rupture in new and complex ways, building on long-standing black cultural forces (1994: 70)8

The problem for me here is that the qualities of flow, continuity, rupture, polyrhythmia, layering; indeed, all the musicological qualities associated with Afro-diasporic culture; are, so far as contemporary youth in Australia in the 1990s are concerned, part of a larger cultural repertoire, rather than being identifiably 'black'. Accounts such as that of Rose, grounding the possibility of a Hip Hop collectivity in a cultural politics of continuity and identification, could only ever understand an Australian Hip Hop experience as being inauthentic. And yet, Ser Reck, Def Wish, Mick E, Sound Unlimited, all understand their experience as being authentic. Although discourses identifying blackness and authenticity still abound in the local, Sydney context, 'white' (and yellow, and olive, and brown) folk cannot assert a claim to Hip Hop authenticity through a simple identification with 'colour' or a biological or even a cultural continuity with African-Americans. They, in fact, recognise the absolutely mediated quality of their relationship to what they know of as the 'origins' of their
(adopted) practices, and yet are able to resolve this absolute difference by producing a discourse of cultural continuity which transcends the necessity for a causal, organic continuity. The point is that an individual in Sydney, Australia, in 1982, can get Hip Hop Culture from a television video clip, and that what they understand as being the essence of that Culture is so pure, so transcendent, that the being-ness of an African-American is understood, in effect, as an expression of that transcendent ground, rather than the other way around. A white Sydney kid can empathise with a black American kid through the shared experience of Hip Hop, which comes before either.

Within the scene, Def Wish Cast's album was approved for its 'authenticity': its rawness, its graininess, its lack of pretension, its truth. The Sound Unlimited album, on the other hand, was heard as being inauthentic, as not being grainy enough, as being a sell-out, its sound cleaned up for mass consumption. In my analysis of tracks from the respective albums, it is possible to discern the musicological grounds for the making of this distinction, whereby 'authenticity' is articulated to a particular mode of vocalisation, and to a particular sonic quality, where 'noisiness' bestows authenticity. The interesting thing is, however, that even these qualities are up for negotiation within the Hip Hop listening community. The work of the Los Angelino producer Dr Dre, late of NWA, for example, was celebrated for its smoothness of production, for the slickness of its beats, its crystal clarity. NAS was celebrated for 'butter-smooth' delivery.

What, then, appear as contradictions on the face of the musicological evidence, are resolved in terms of a more abstract category, which is 'read' as underlying the (contingent) features of the primary (musical) text: hard core-ness.
Hard Core

I have elsewhere discussed the centrality of the notion of 'hard core' to the various Hip Hop practices (Maxwell 1994b). Of course, the expression, with its implicit internal/external binarism, is widely used outside Hip Hop scenes in pretty much the same way, more recently to refer to dance and techno music, and even more generally, it is used to describe explicit pornography. However, in the Sydney Hip Hop scene, 'hard core' carried particular connotations. Break-dancers doing floor moves on rough abrasive carpet or asphalt were referred to as being 'hard core'. A compulsive bomber would be described in identical terms: surveying a thrashed train carriage, a writer approvingly celebrates the tagger: "man, he is hard core".

Def Wish defends his decision to rap in a "simple b-boy style" on "A.U.S.T" by claiming that whatever style he uses, it will always be

... Hard Core!

'Cos hard core means true to the music . . .

I asked DJ Vame what "true to the music" meant. Simply this, he explained; it meant being 'faithful' to the 'original' 'instruments' of Hip Hop: two turntables and a microphone. Now, I'm going to skate right across these issues of authenticity and origin: I have covered such matters in depth already (see Maxwell 1994b; Fornäs 1994; Cloonan 1995). And I should mention a couple of other 'definitions' of the term that I was offered; for Mick E of Illegal Substance, a track was 'hard core' if it was based on a low, slow bass beat (he swings his body slowly, almost sensuously in order to fully impart the significance of this sound). DJ E.S.P. qualified this definition: "hard core means a really heavy sound, something that wouldn't be played on radio" and they both laugh, Mick adding "[it] stays underground". Heidi offered this: "a record is hard core," she told me, "if no-one else has heard it yet", a perhaps more insightful definition, recasting the question of musical 'meanings' into a sociological context, engaging with the Bourdieuan discourse of a
logic of scarcity, generative of what Thornton calls "sub-cultural capital" (1996).

'Hard core' is more usefully thought of in terms of cohering a range of practices, articulating them to, and signifying, a central, substratal idea, without actually stating exactly what that idea was (recall the 'nameless language' quote above, p155).

We can find a theoretical model for understanding these processes of social semiotics in the work of C. S. Peirce.

**Peirce**

"A sign", for Peirce, "stands for something to the idea which it produces . . ." (Eco 1979: 180).\(^9\) The emphasis here is upon the 'constructive' nature of signifying practices: ideas are produced by signifying practices, rather than simply representing social facts. Peirce called the sign a representamen: "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity."

For Peirce, then, a representamen has three references:

- first, it is a sign to some thought that interprets it;
- second, it is a sign for some object to which in that thought it is equivalent;
- third, it is a sign in some respect or quality, which brings it into connection with its object (Peirce in Weber, 1987: 11)

That is, a sign (representamen) is necessarily communicative, addressed to an interpreting thought, with a view to creating, "in the mind of that person [to whom it is addressed] an equivalent sign." Peirce called this equivalent (or better) sign [representamen], an interpretant.

The second reference of the representamen, for Peirce, is to some thing, which he called an object. This object need not be a concrete thing, but, in Eco's words, "a rule, a law, a prescription . . . the operational description of a set of possible experiences" (Eco 1979: 308).
The third feature of the representamen develops this idea: the sign is of the object, bearing a quality or respect in which it is brought into relationship with the object.

The representamen in the example I am looking at, is the expression ‘hard core’. In Peircian terms, this kind of (linguistic) sign is called a ‘symbol’, a symbolic relationship being one of arbitrary convention. Peirce’s analysis in this respect overlaps with Saussure’s linguistic semiotics. However, while for Saussure and the structuralist tradition that built on his work language was the basic model for understanding all signifying processes, in the Peircian scheme, the ‘symbolic’, arbitrary relationship is a special case of a more general semiotics. Other signifying relationships, for Peirce, rely on relationships of shared quality (iconicity), or contiguity or causality (indexicality).

Now, the point of all this is that “the interpretant interprets by bringing the sign into a relationship of equivalence with an object” (Weber 1987: 11-12). It does so through a process of selection: the selection of a quality or respect through which the equivalence of the interpretant can be established. A sign stands for its object, suggests Peirce, “not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea . . . the ground of the representamen”. The ‘ground’, explains Eco, is that which can be comprehended and transmitted of a given object under a certain profile: it is the content of an expression and appears to be identical with meaning (182).

Eco concludes that “since it is impossible to define the ground if not as meaning, and it is impossible to define any meaning if not as a series of interpretants”, then “ground, meaning and interpretant are in fact the same”.

That is, signification depends on a complex of relationships, signs, interpretations both retrospectively, in terms of an “immense mass of cognition already formed” (Eco’s ‘rules’, ‘laws’ and ‘proscriptions’, but also conventions, frames, genres), and prospectively, in terms of the addressee of any given
representamen, upon whose interpretation it depends for its efficacy.

The problem that arises, then, is that of the epistemological status of the sign, or the ontological status of the object. If signs only ever refers to other signs, how, to quote Weber, “can we distinguish between true and false interpretations?” (op cit 12). For Peirce, answers Weber, the real is that which “sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in”. Weber explains that here,

having eliminated the “object” as the origin or foundation of cognition, Peirce . . . replaces it by a transcendental subject, the community of investigators . . . when we appeal to the notion of truth, we are referring to the kind of future consensus described as the community of investigators: what is real . . .

. . . [and this is the important bit] . . .

. . . what is “real” is that reference, not its existence. (op cit 13)

The ‘reality’ of ‘truth’, then, is the appeal to the future consensus about that truth, rather than the ‘content’ of that truth itself.

Here is the attribution of not simply ‘a’ or ‘some’ meaning to ‘a’ piece of, or ‘a’ form of music, but a general meaningfulness to music produced by these particular means. The potential openness of such a process of discrimination is, as I have argued, a powerful strategic tool, allowing a particular musical text or performance to be included or excluded from a generic canon.

In the relatively short period of my research into the scene, for example, I witnessed the acceptance of Hip Hop-jazz fusion recordings. Initially, albums such as Easy Mo Bee’s collaboration with the late Miles Davis were generally given the thumbs down. As more ‘respected’ figures such as Guru moved into the same
territory with the "Jazzamattaz" albums, not only was the synthesis of rap and jazz accepted: its success was offered as proof of a cultural continuity. "Hip Hop is jazz, man" Ser Reck explained to me. Such recordings contained, as part of the music itself, a pedagogy arguing for such a continuity: listen to Guru's introductory and 'half-way' commentary on the first "Jazzamatazz". Read the liner notes. These historico-cultural discourses quickly circulated through the scene. By late 1994, the injunction against live instruments was lifted to allow rappers J.U., The Sleeping Monk, Pewbic and B.U. to rap over the acid-jazz band Ute at Sydney jazz venue The Basement. The scene momentarily underwent a subtle bohemianisation, productive of distinctly Keroacian-Beat habituses.

Discourses of musical authenticity and signification within the Hip Hop Scene, then, were bound up in sociological processes which operated within the implicit assumption that the music (and the breaking, and the writing) represented a pre-existing, or at least ontologically prior, cultural centre. Meaning is the emergent (never completed, always partial) 'product' of ongoing negotiations and interpretations.

But that's still not enough. It's not just about negotiations, and meanings, and discourse. It's not even about music. Look at Blaze's words at the head of this section: it's the rhythm of Hip Hop you "get into".

It's . . . It.

Recall J.U. impressing upon me that "it's the words, man, it's all about the words". I have suggested that socially negotiated interpretations of particular musicological features, and the social institution of those interpretations generates discourses of authenticity around those features, which in turn are used to support a transcendental signifier—the 'essence of Hip Hop'— which stands as the ground generative of representative expressions. But J.U. didn't think about it that way: for him, what was important was the it, in which the idea of Hip Hop communality, and around
which the discourses of Hip Hop communality constellated. It is to this it that is the name given to a state of affect, to a mode of experience, of embodiment, of rhythm (often articulated to discourses of authenticity entwined around essentialising blackness) that I now want to turn.

And, to look for rhythm, what better place to turn than to the dance-floor . . .

**Dance**

What Hip Hop is about you know is respect, getting respect and showing people your talent, when you go out at lunchtime and break and the whole school's watching you like that's what you do it for, it's an incredible feeling you know . . .

Sydney breaker

**Rap City**

The evening had not been going well.

I was at 'Rap City', a one-off event in a nightclub built into the foot of an art deco sky-scraper in the business centre of Sydney. The crews were, as they would say, 'in the house': a collection of t-shirted and baggy-jeaned, crop-haired young men, and a slightly lesser number of young women, the latter looking pretty much like any young women at a Sydney nightclub. The boys played pool, the girls sat or stood together, watching. There had been a ripple of excitement an hour earlier when Def Wish Cast, heading the night's selection of acts, and their entourage of west-side crews arrived, but otherwise, nothing seemed to be happening. Everybody was drinking beer or spirits, and, as always at these events, a solid thump pulsed through the room.
The problem tonight was with the sounds. We had been waiting for an hour and a half for the first crew of the night to kick some rhymes, but each time they stepped to the microphones, a piercing tone shrieked through the speakers, and, scowling and cursing, they would retreat from the stage. Technicians with rolls of gaffer tape and heavy metal t-shirts crawled over speaker stacks, rewiring, tweaking, doing whatever it is that they could do to make the whole thing work, amidst a general air of exasperation and annoyance.

But at the turntables, unaffected by the technical problems, a DJ was cutting up a storm. In and around the wash of voices, the click of the pool games, the fuzzy, ever accelerating, rising rush of alcohol-lubricated conversation, shouts, laughter, the pulsing beats remained a constant. Each track would fade into the next, a continuous polyphonic flow of raps, voices, beats, merging into the one meta-beat, the DJ moving from track to track, dropping riffs and breaks over the top of instrumentals, cutting and scratching through the vocals, generating this seamless macro-beat, throbbing through the room.

How might I describe the sound, the feeling of the sound, as it thumped, pulsed, kicked through my body? I'm no fan, no dancer, but the phat, phat beats thrilled through my flesh. Bruce Johnson has written of the physiological intimacy of metaphors for the experience of popular music, citing examples from the argots of blues and jazz: "funky", "cooking" (1996: 100-101). For Hip Hop, as we've seen, the metaphors are no less visceral: the music "kicks", "slams", is "fat". But in this instance, the reference is less a metaphorical one than a literal description . . .10

For hours after Hip Hop nights I would lie awake—not with that intra-aural keening ring, the symptom of physical damage that you get from a pub rock gig—but from a kind of hyper-corporeality, as if the deep, muscular core of my body has been massaged for three, four hours, its presence foregrounded by the
echoes, deep in my chest, of the drums and the thudding, subtonal noise of the bass. And across and against the vast, deep somato-sonic territory of this almost subliminal, entrancing bass pulse is the staccato, off-beat kick of the snares, tick—tick—tick—ticking me back from the potential danger of my own dissolution into the beat, snapping me upright, up, up, before the next moment, microseconds later, of miasmic intensity, when my being folds back inwards and, inevitably, (the spatial metaphor appears, unbidden) downwards. It is a heightened feeling of corporeal being, my body alive, awake, now, hours later, in spite of my own efforts to lie it down, to make it sleep.

At Rap City, the dance floor was about half full: groups of boys and girls danced together. Others danced by themselves, some talking, leaning over to shout words into cupped ears, laugh, point out other dancers. Fluid, languid, sensuous, sweaty movements, people starting to groove, but still, identifiably, people; individuals arrayed across space. The music was tremendous: driving, throbbing beats below, the staccato snare and high hat backbeats kicking across the top, and, somewhere in the middle of the mix, the rich, sonorous raps, sometimes getting busy (“I am the roughest, roughest, roughest / I am the toughest, toughest, toughest . . .”), then kicking back into a languid west coast gansta flow. I recall an interview with Public Enemy’s Chuck D: “Gangsta rappers’ sound is laid-back because their lives are hectic. I like hectic music because my life is laid back” (in Gonzales 1994: 49).

“It should be noted,” offer Havelock Nelson and Michael A. Gonzales, somewhat redundantly, “that in African-American culture the art of movement is closely linked to the art of noize (be it blues, jazz or hip-hop); the image of Black bodies swaying to “the beat, the beat” is as old as the motherland” (1991: 89). At Rap City, in this moment of what, for such Afro-essentialising accounts, can only be imitative culture, the energy level builds, as white (and yellow, and olive, and brown, but nowhere ‘Black’) bodies sway to a building ‘krush’. The DJ was goin’ off, the dance floor getting busier, as he dropped Eric B’s famous sample from the
beginning of ‘Paid in Full’ into the instrumental break of another track: a science teacher voice (sampled from what sounds like a high school educational film) intones “this is a journey into sound”. It is a virtuoso performance on the part of the DJ, as he scratches the sample backwards and forwards over the primary track, dropping the grab . . .

this . . .

 scratch

 . . this . . .

 scratch

 . . this . . .

 scratch

 . . [beats] . . .

 this is a journey . . .

 . . (scratch) . . .

 . . [beats] . . .

 . . this . . .

 . . this . . .

 this . . .

 and so on, tantalisingly, for fully five minutes, building the crowd up, waiting for the right moment to release the dancers into the whole rap.

And then, there it is . . . a sudden opening, a yawning gap in the sonic space: a moment of suspension as the flight of the music, of bodies in motion, reaches an apogee, a moment that feels to be without gravity. The thickness, the busy-ness, the dense chaotic energy of the mix seems to flee to the edges of the room and
beyond, leaving an anticipatory void: the room is in free-fall for the barest of moments, soaring, waiting, hearts racing, waiting for the

\[ \text{drop} \]

... of the DJ's needle back into the groove.

And then, the massive, sensuous, broken-down and pared-back kick of "Paid in Full" thumps through the smoke and lasers: a roomy, \textit{funky}, sexy, expansive, crisp, \textit{metabolic} sound, grabbing hold of all those bodies, wrenching them out of that sublime moment of \textit{waiting} ... and they start to undulate, to groove, to melt into the pure fatness of one of Hip Hop's defining moments.\textsuperscript{11}
Eight measures into the track, the sampled voice comes again:

A journey which along the way will bring to you new colour, new direction, new value

and at once bongos start to tap across the territory laid out by the high-hat, bass and tom-tom refrain. Another sampled voice slides in over the funky, funky bass, an female Arabic voice (Israeli pop singer Ofrah Haza, “singing a Middle Eastern folk tune”: Costello and Wallace 1990: 143), all half-tones and melismas through and around the beat, punctuated by staccato, slightly echo-enhanced tom-tom fills.

Through this, the tone of the dance floor had changed: the siren call of the Eric B and Rakim track had drawn fifty, sixty more bodies into the crowd, pushing against each other, infused now by the insistent, metabolic drive of the beat. By the time Rakim’s smokily deep rap rumbles across, through, under and around the dancefloor, the sinuous, snaky, sexy beat has everybody in its thrall. Lips move with the rap, eyes are glazed, bodies loose. By the time we get to the break-down, just the kicking drum machine track, some more dialogue samples, the room is simply grooving.

Here again is the play between ‘flow’, ‘layering’ and ‘ruptures in line’ that Rose identifies in this music: the creation, accumulation and sustaining of “rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity” which is abruptly interrupted. Rose hypothesises in this music a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish and transform them. However, be prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact plan on social rupture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics (1994: 39)

But I couldn’t help but feel, there, watching the floor at Rap City, that such considerations were a world away. Sure, this

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emancipatory, guerilla discourse circulates around within this scene, but as an account adduced after the affective fact of the beat, of the break. I’m more interested in Rose’s counsel: to “find pleasure in the rupture . . .”

Listen to this account, in David Toop’s Rap Attack. He is quoting Afrika Bambaata, seminal figure from the Hip Hop ur-scene in the Bronx of the early 1970s, talking about the ‘break’, that fragment of a “Latin-tinged funk” piece that was “popular with the dancers”. DJs like Cool Herc would play the percussive break, ignoring the rest of the track, sustaining the same few bars by skipping from one disc to an identical disc on the second turntable. Bambaata explains:

he just kept that beat going . . . that certain part of the record that everybody waits for—they just let their inner self go and get wild. The next thing you know the singer comes back in and you’d be mad . . . (in Toop 1991: 60):

More than simply the release of an ‘inner self’, in such moments there is a loss of self . . . “the next thing you know” . . . a departure from self, that can no longer know its destination.

Truly awesome, abyssal voids open up in Eric B and Rakkim’s music. The flow stops, a yawning absence that is at once sonic and visceral looms, opens up across the room. Bodies lunge forward into the emptiness, weightless, pure momentum. Hearts, blood coursing through veins and arteries, muscles, synapses, fall headlong with the somatic pulse still thumping, soaring, falling, tumbling until, with a crashing, thick, broad sub-tonal

!thump!

the beat returns, crashing through the sweat, the sinewy mass of movement, scooping up this contiguous throng of free-falling bodies, catching them deep, deep in the core, driving them further, longer, out . . . and it feels good.
We are getting closer, perhaps, to discerning the affective grounds for the thinking of community. This is Victor Turner territory: the forging of the raw material of collective being, communitas, through the ritualised sharing of experience. Indeed, for the seven minutes of the track all the bodies on the floor seem to meld into a continuity of being. In the sexualised imagery of Elias Canetti, this moment is "the discharge", when, "in a crowd . . . man can become free of [the] fear of being touched", when social distances are broken down and the individual is dissolved:

Ideally, all are equal here; no distinctions count, not even that of sex. The man pressed against him is the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body (1981: 16)

The crowd becomes the subject of affect and agency, rather than simply a sum of sovereign parts. It is the crowd that wants to grow; the crowd craves density. The crowd strains towards its (whatever) goal, upon the attainment of which it will disintegrate: it is the deferral of the goal that maintains the possibility of being a crowd, just as, for Hage, it is the impossibility of the completion of the national project that is the condition of possibility for nationalism (1993: 97). And good DJs know this too.

Bakhtin, too, wrote of these moments: the carnival crowd, which is

the people as a whole . . . organised in their own way.
. . . outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organisation (1984: 255, emphasis in original)

The grooving night club crowd is carnivalesque, sharing its being in the emergent funk, the moment possessing a particular character that exceeds that of any given individual in the crowd of moving bodies:

the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies, acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of
the people’s mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible to . . . exchange bodies . . . (1984: 255, emphasis added)

Turner distinguishes between the calendrical, culturally integrated, ‘eufunctional’ formally framed, liminal *rite du passage*, and the liminoid:

[T]he liminoid is . . . felt to be freer than the liminal, a matter of choice, not obligation . . . One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid (op cit 55)

At Rap City, the experience of the groove is decidedly not *liminal*, but liminoid: a moment Turner describes as being of “potentially limitless freedom”, characterised by a sense of ‘flow’ (1982: 54). The groove experience moves beyond a simple metaphysics of self-presence. It is a moment of blissful intensity, of suspension, dissolution (and, it has to be said, of the experience of a kind of freedom).

Andrew Murphie, writing about the phenomenology of the dancefloor, describes the power of what Deleuze and Guatarri call *the refrain* to “territorialise” space, to establish an “ecology” of being in which music, a music, figures as “a constant form of becoming of time, space, and everything that inhabits them” (Murphie 1996: 20). Music, a music, is not to be understood as being produced and received by already existing sovereign subjects; rather, the music—or, more specifically, *the refrain*—and the subjects involved with it, are considered part of a “machinic assemblage”, productive of the ecology of the moment, productive, in turn, of (new) subjectivities.

Introducing a vital distinction, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the refrain, *la ritournelle* (1986: 300), is the “content of music” (ibid). In the bluntest sense, the refrain is repetition, or, literally, that which returns. The refrain is not simply the *rhythm*, either, or the beat, the *metre*; operating within an existing field of space-time; the refrain **territorialises.** It makes space/time, rather than
operating within an already existing, Kantian spatio-temporal field.

'Rhythm', for Deleuze and Guattari, "is never on the same plane as that which has rhythm" (313). A dynamic space opens up, a potential, a throwing forward into being. Rhythm is never, they say, temporally exact: it is the frisson, the instability, the non-fit of the body and the metre that is generative, exciting: "there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march" (ibid). The refrain, on Deleuze and Guattari's account, is the emergent totality of this frisson. This is the foundational moment of the ergonomics, as it were, of the refrain; in the language of jazz, as Keil notes, this is 'swing': the tension generated by a complex relationship between meter and rhythm" (Keil 1994: 59)

The refrain enjoys a complex relationship to 'music', a term now reserved for a kind of domestication of this expansionary potential of the refrain. The refrain, however, is not simply the precursor to music. It is "a means of preventing music, warding it off, or forgoing it" (ibid). Music is that which, they continue, de-territorialises the refrain, taking it up, laying hold of it, "forming a block" with the refrain in order to take it "somewhere else". That is, to an already existing somewhere else.

Here is a language for the way of being I have been describing on the dancefloor, the surging over the dancefloor of this being-ness (what Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming"); an analytic for this process, in which a vasty, oceanic tide of music/being re-invents space and re-invents being. Further, for Murphie, the refrain is that which facilitates a flight from self, that which "continually allows . . . escape from sovereignty" (1996: 29). What I want to take from this analysis is the distinction being drawn here between what I want to characterise as the expansive, territorialising form of the refrain, in which affect displaces the sovereignty of the already-located subject, and the defining, de- and re-territorialising form of music, the moment in which the 'outwardness' of the refrain is enclosed, or articulated to a
narrative or discourse of 'culture': the performative 'becoming' is integrated into the pedagogic narrative of 'being'.

One part of the appeal of this Deleuzo-Guattarian poetics lies in its concession to the irreducibility of the experience of the refrain. Placing aside the risks of what Zizek (1993) and Ferry (1992) have described in the Deleuzian/Guattarian discourse as the Spinozist celebration of connectedness, and the attendant withdrawal from a practical, communitarian ethics, I want to suggest that the appeal of this account for my purposes lies in its outward gaze. Behaviour, performance, being, are understood as processes, unfolding, extending outwards, as it were, rather than emanating from a given centre.

And it is in this state of suspended time-space that I am going to leave this grooving crowd, while I turn my own unfortunately quite temporally constrained attention to another place, another time.

Flow

Abrupt change of scene:

Midwinter, well after midnight, a few months prior to 'Rap City'. I was at 2 SER, in the studio next door to the one in J.U. and Mick E were to battle a few weeks later above. A handful of rhymers had gathered to freestyle on air, an unprecedented, anything goes opportunity.

There were perhaps half a dozen young men in the room, a few more outside in the foyer, and when somebody slipped in or out of the soundproof door, snatches of laughter and the sweet/acrid smell of marijuana wafted in: there was a bit of a party going on. For the next couple of hours, the rhymers took it in turns to rap over instrumentals spun by a handful of DJs or 'selectors'. The
contributions ranged from obviously prepared, rehearsed raps, through quasi-free verses, in which rehearsed, reliable rhyme schemas provided generative frameworks for more exploratory extemporisations, to fully improvised bursts of free-associative freestyles.

*Style* was at a premium. Not a shared, house, style; style as “the universe of discourses within which musical meanings arise” (Meyer in Feld, 1994: 110), but *individual* style (although, as I will suggest below, a sense of shared style is constructed around the individual styles in the course of the proceedings). In the Hip Hop argot, your *style* was what you ‘bring to the microphone’, your distinctive deviation, perhaps, from the generic norm; what marked you as different, demonstrated that you were *expressing yourself*. (The generic style became known, through the course of the evening, and on several subsequent nights, as ‘Sydney stylee’.)

**Freestylee**

There were a range of styles here tonight. At one end of the scale was The Sleeping Monk’s hilarious, smooth, loose-limbed, slump-shouldered, regular, sophisticatedly rhymed, metrically observant delivery. He raps:

My style viscously flows, *goes up your nose*
The dirty smelly funk supplied by The Monk
Vindicator of the streets
I attenuate my styles
More confusing than a episode of “*X-Files*”
Secreting brain impulses like a roller coaster
Don’t fuck around
Or you’ll get pinned like a poster
Wrecking shit up with the poets from the urban
Lyrical lockjaws hug your head like a turban.
Hard core connoisseur you’re just a bunch of fairies
Annihilating suckers from Bondi to St Marys
I got my pla-toon like *William Dafoe*
E I O E I O I *got the flow*
... Disseminating metaphors too hard to explain
I give you the lyrical Chao-Lin crane
Giving eargasm
Vain digs in the crates
I don't wear Starter Caps 'cos I don't live in the States
Combination of dexterity
Here's a little sample
Of the Monk . . .
Dwelling in the temple

The bold-type words were punched by another rapper, suggesting that the lines were familiar, crafted, or at least that certain couplets were standardised in The Monk's repertoire. The Monk prided himself upon the sophistication of his verses, his elaborate intertextuality, the arcaneness of his metaphors. He was a devoted fan of the 1970s television series "Kung Fu", the mediascape from which he borrowed his 'monk' and 'chao-lin' imagery.

On the other hand, J.U.'s roughshod, caterwauling rush of syllables were associated less through semantic content than through a feral homophonia: tumbling, headlong cascades of rhyming words falling on top of each other, constructing strings of nonsense that loop back to a suddenly recalled half-idea from two breaths beforehand, creating fleeting moments of structural elegance, of narrative suture, which abruptly dissolved with the exhaustion of his breath, a new idea flooding into the flow with the next deep-chested intake. His arms chopped the air in front of him, his body straining for the beat, lost in the urgent thrill of his delivery. Here J.U. introduces his rap, sidling up to the microphone, speaking as his body started to feel out the beat:

This is the live crazy freestyle stylees and this is how we wreck it in the east . . .

[and this is the moment of transition, the slide from a spoken discourse into a rap]

. . . because you know that

[J.U.'s body dipping and weaving, his voice hiccoughing into an iambic marking of the pulse, soft hard, soft hard]
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

At **twelve to one** the **fun begun** with Sugar Ray

[but that is not going anywhere, and the formal device (soft *hard* soft *hard*) yields to a more comprehensive, comfortable *flow*, his body rocking, swaying]

But ah bullshit that's the hip hop that gets my \ shit
My money yeah it's not funny
My clothes not \ crummy like the cookie monster
But I'll toast ya in the toaster
I'll boast ya that I've got a flow
That's sorta sorta \ oh slow and bring it back on the beat \nOne two I think I'd like it up in my earphones \nBut now it's red I get the bone \nIt's covered in the blue foam that's it Miguel \nNow I can hear myself and that's the real shit \nI pass it to Bullwinkle because you know he shines on the microphone will kick your behind like the lazy arsed mule,\ *uh* . . .

J.U. tumbled in and out of the beat, drawing upon his negotiation of the rhythm for the content of his rap ("oh slow it up and bring it back on the beat"), the rhyming of syllables ("toast ya/toaster/boast ya") driving his verses into uncharted semantic territory. The back-slashes indicate pauses for breath, but the final two lines were delivered in a single lungful, his delivery accelerating as, already hyperventilating, he strained to end the semantic unit. Another taste:

we get wild when you roll around the east \ *uh*! I kick it when I rock it I got it in my pocket
I pull it out when I go into Club \nX Yeah, I rock it I get vexed I flex then I \nKnock the booty yeah that's my cutie
Word up that's sleeper than a creep \nFor those that sleep on the microphone you stand alone \nI hold mine when I doubt my confessions
My lessons I'm bending my flow back in \nI begin to ren with my friends yeah that's the Poets\nI'll kick it to the Sabotage yeah 'cos they're large
And Ben from Voodoo Flavor yeah \nYou'd better savour this, your saviour's in th'Australia no
failures Up up and away-ay . . . ye-ah . . .

J.U.'s verses don't transcribe as well as The Monk's, into a nice orderly rhyme form. For J.U., the verses were broken up by his breath, these momentary pauses allowing him to redirect semantic energy, fuelled by the generative possibilities of the 'random' rhymes: "savour/saviour/Australia/no failure". More often than not, his contributions ended with an apostrophic ejaculation: "uh!", or "ye-ah!".

And then there's Pewbic the Hunter, of the "freaky styles", his voice singing up into a falsetto register between gulps of breath, punctuating and apostrophising his verses as he falls in and out of the strict rhythm of the beat. Here, the italics mark a syllable on which he allowed his voice to soar into an almost *falsetto vibrato*, arhythmically punctuating his delivery:

Stuck in the middle of a battle
A huntsman I am
Till the end
No weapon but a mike
Strike at me I will defend
And
Send a message not to fear
I brought too many skills for me
They're coming out my ear
Like

*tears*

Which
Flow from out your eye
My peers *which* we look up at you and I

Ri-sing
We *bring*
Australia not a failure a Hip Hop don't you string a-
Long with culture too strong for the sell-out
Figs have an odour someone get that smell out
of the ground
Yet under I wonder *crew*
Pursue more development many props are due
to all of you *who*
Pay attention to our verses and our cur-ses
I need some to rehearse us
Merciless in the battle I'm a addict
Listen close and you can make a verdict

Pewbic's appeal to his colleagues lay both in his ability to effect logical connections between apparently randomly accessed material, and the vulgarity of his verses. His rhymes were explicit, an armchair psychoanalyst's wet dream: first person narratives of adolescent sexual derring-do, the affective intensity and graphic rendering of which surprised even Pewbic himself. His face would register the shock of his own raps, stifling his own guffaws as he protested innocence afterwards: "I can't help it, man . . . ."

Mr E., falling out of his flow, substituted nonsense syllables for words, straining, hoping, to recover the momentum of his rhymes, slipping in and out of "Spanglish", the rapper's amalgam of English and Spanish:

Hence to commence the soliloquy
Bringin' a brief history
Mystery defender down [This drawn out]
Listen t'me [faster]
The negative \ relative to positive
Vertical superlative
Learn \ from the negative
Vibe antithesis sister and brother
Us and we and them . . .
. . . as individuals,
Playing a loop and along
Just going so-lo so low
That the only way to go is go up
From the playground
Get a reknown found the
Rockin' the sandpit
From the dark hit
spo-spo la hi-ho Silver away we go
Know the way that we play
Stay around and for ups
Locks up ama sa in the true meaning of the word
What up su-blitin subliminal
Minimal fus jus sus in te hermanos
Mr E. worked from a series of binary opposites, his body rocking from side to side as he started to flow. And when he gets going, he is freed from words, from sense: “spo-spo la hi-ho” saved by “Silver away!”, the end of the rhyme disintegrating into nonsense syllables, falling over into Spanish, his voice by now kicking up into a higher register, arms thrashing out . . . whoah! Try this one:

To the streets, originality keys to please the sound . . .
. . . and I’m down with reality checkin’ it out talkin’ about
the totality of the spirit is so . . .
Unifying humanity the reasonable people of society is irrelevant
Blind by the smell of it the smell of [untranscribable]
Consider yourself bleh to earth
Incomprehensible reach \ speech unable to obtain but
speaking out the words understands your heart looking around at the problems easily pleased by the verio
cenario the stereo and video and tecking the blitin of the
original case yeow!

The verse structure yields to a foaming rush of sounds, and Pewbic, caught up in the thrill of it, apostrophised:

That was motherfucken’ bent!!! Ah!!

And Cec, The Chief, didn’t freestyle, preferring to perform his word perfect rhymes through a blunted haze:

It’s The Chief, back in the house with the keys
Listen to the magical cuts I release
And these crazy metaphors from the east
1994 here comes the beast
Ripping up the microphone is not a crime
Here comes the rhyme, dripping with slime
What’s the time? I think it’s time to get ill
Listen to the wicked words from my grill
But still you can’t defeat the Latinos
When you can’t seem to fit your ass through the keyhole
Hold on now it’s time to get it on
Fuck the love songs we’re coming on strong
Doing no wrong we’re just two hip hoppers
Listen to the twisted words from my voca loca
Do you hear what I’m saying
My words are spraying, and I’m not playing around
‘Cos I grow underground
Here comes the West Side, check out the sound
Profound knowledge not like a sausage
I’ve got a lot flavour better than motherfucking cottage Cheese, jeeze, what’s that smell?
I think it’s the weed from the depths of hell

The Monk seemed to know this one as well, punching the marked syllables in a low, disaffected voice. The final line was received uproariously, although, in general, The Chief was the outsider in this gathering: he was not a freestyler, and his rhymes are, I was informed later, wack.

Finally, there was J.U.’s partner in rhyme, B.U.. Together, they rapped as the Urban Poets, referred to in The Monk’s rhyme above (p323). They shared an absolute devotion to freestyling. On a subsequent night a few months later, I watched J.U. and B.U., after two hours of more or less continuous improvising, having exhausted their own capacity for invention, solicit (alphabet) letters from the audience. They would then use the offered letter to construct completely alliterated rhymes. A kind of b-boy Theatresports. B.U. (an abbreviation for ‘Bullwinkle’) based his freestyles on the elaboration of tropes, like this one:

Flying away, through outer space yes I never dismay because I catch the hootchy signal just in time my radio functions came onto line I’m outta danger but I’m coming down to Earth in my hootchy cap-sule so all you MCs better run outta here because I’m the fat lyrical ranger slappin’ down sucker MCs I know those techno wizards on the microphone and on the decks it’s Bullwinkle here to snap necks Like E.P. and D. I’m soon to cash large cheques I’ll pass it on to some more MCs to wreck shit . . .

On other occasions, he worked his way through a series of greengrocer metaphors, characterising himself and his fellow rhymers as various fruits and vegetables available for sale in the rap supermarket.
The Rapping Body

The thematic concerns of these raps are clear: a wonderful, heteroglossic, intertextual phantasmogoria, colourful and excessive. All the Hip Hop discourses, the 'Hip Hop Ideoscape' are to be found in these examples, as well as the textual and performative markers differentiating the all-important self-expressive, personal style of the rhymers.

But I'm not only concerned with the question of style here, or with the technicalities of rapping. Instead I want to consider the affective, embodied dimension of rhyming, the rappers' accounts of their practice, their account of how that practice relates to their understanding of their Culture.

In the local, Sydney scene, to rap is to flow, "to flow" is to rap. The insider language directly correlates with Rose's critical musicology, (p 281, above). Rhymers talk of "flowing", of "getting on the flow", of losing themselves to and in the flow ("I can't help it man . . ."). It is a feeling, a state of being. When a rapper is flowing, his friends cheer, hoot, groove along with him.

And this flow is visible. A rhymer will start to rap by sidling up to the beat. His hand cups a headphone to his ears and his head starts to bob up and down, the movement growing, moving into the shoulders, a breath is drawn, and the first lines start to come . . . A transmission shift, the transitional moment between speaking and rapping . . . J.U.'s shoulders suddenly hunch upwards, his head is tucked down, in between them, and his hands move away from the side of his head, his forearms hesitantly held in front of his chest, palms open, facing towards him. A second breath, and now he is closer to the beat, travelling alongside it, feeling it out. His hands start to move in front of him, gentle chopping motions, syncopated, one chop after the next marking the syllables he raps. The next breath and there! I can see it . . . now he is flowing, he is the beat. The words tumble out, his voice lifting two? three tones, his arms chop chopping the air, hands laying out rhyme after rhyme, and now his hips, his legs, his whole body rocking and
swaying, his eyes closed. Another breath, and another, the words flying, popping, spitting, gushing out, exhausting his breath and there! again, you can see the moment, he slips out of the flow, and all I can think of is body-surfing, and the moment when the wave falls off below you, and you’re left breathless, floating, floating, and it takes long seconds to come back to yourself, to turn yourself around and swim back out to the break.13

Each rapper would have a preferred “beat”: when a selector placed a particular track on the turntable, all the rappers present will feel it out, let it into their bodies: to me it always looks like someone trying on a new jacket, seeing if it fits, and if it does fit, whether they feel comfortable wearing it. “That’s my beat, man,” someone will say, moving to rhyme, nodding approval, starting to go . . . a rhymer drying up would be offered a new beat.

This idea of flow constituted the aesthetic discourse of this practice. The rhymers said “I get on the flow”, meaning that they go with it, where-ever it is that it is going. The flow is primary: although they might say “I flow . . .” there is a certain discomfort with the subject-predicate grammar. The speaker might hesitate, and make a rolling, unfolding gesture with their hands . . . “I . . . you know [gesture] . . . flow” The flow, the rhymes, the rap, in these moments (you can see it, the kick, the lift, the release, the flight into and with the flow as their bodies soften, bend, move without direction, undirected, at one with the flow) is understood as being beyond the rapper’s agency; and this is, on their account, why they do it . . . they escape their being, experience an ecstasis, a flight buoyed by the refrain, and the stream of words becomes almost an impediment.

Sense was sacrificed to flow, to the imperative of staying on the flow, body-surfing the flow until, breathless, drawn, they (literally—you can see it) fall, fall, shrink back to life size, all at once having to control arms, jaws, heads that have, for precious moments, been something else, been out of their control. The light seemed to go out in their eyes, and somebody else would step to the mike
J.U. looks like this, now, after his verse, eyes glazed, face drawn as he watches another rhymer go through the same thing: this struggle, negotiation with the beat, a fusion of self and beat that becomes not merely the self rapping with the beat, but a new being, an emergent flowing of being. And this is the affective thrall of the freestyle: that dimension of the improvised rap that lies beneath the intoxicating (for the analyst) appeal of the lyrics themselves.

The Mythology of Improvisation

"But", another informant warns me, "you realise that none of them are really improvising . . ."

Allan Moore writes of improvisation that it "is surrounded by myths that treat it somehow as magical, in that it purports to bypass the mind's conscious mechanisms, providing a vehicle for performers to express themselves in a fashion unmediated by any other concerns" (1993: 73). Moore's purpose is to disavow this mythology: improvisation consists of a series of strategies, of formal guidelines, involving "the re-playing of formulae . . . representing the rules of shared by the community" (ibid). This isn't necessarily a terribly dramatic insight, and although I am puzzled by his use of the term 'representing' here, it is not the mechanics of improvisation that I am primarily interested in. Suffice it for me to note that freestylers develop their techniques through (embodied) mimicry, rapping along to recorded commercial raps either at home, or in social situations. I stress the active dimension of these rehearsals: the ability to freestyle is without exception articulated to a particular mode of embodiment. The process offers, additionally, one of the clearest possible examples of Bakhtin's principle of heteroglossia: it is possible to determine almost exactly a given freestyler's model freestyling texts through their performance, both in terms of rhyming and lyrical schemas and in terms of their physical involvement with the beat.
The romantic discourse of self-expression that Moore identifies here in writing about rock (see also Goodwin 1991) is one of the fundamental discourses circulating within and around Hip Hop. Self-expression is a key element in the political discourses of rap, and vast bodies of literature demonstrate, beyond question, the significance and centrality of oral practices in populations which are either pre-literate (cf Abrahams 1976, 1992; Ong 1982) or denied access to literacy (Gates 1988). I am not disputing the accuracy or relevance of such accounts when I chose to diminish their significance in the local, Sydney Hip Hop context. It is impossible to deny the (realised) potential of rap to give voice to politically circumscribed populations in the post-industrial wasteland of the inner cities of Northern American. And, as I have suggested, the discourse of 'finding one's voice' has been significant in the locating of an authentic Hip Hop Community in the undeniably under-resourced, demonised western suburbs of Sydney. To sit with a(n otherwise) barely articulate teenage boy as he flicks through a notebook packed with rhyming couplets; to see a page headed "similes" in that book; to overhear earnest discussions about "metaphor" and to listen to Def Wish Cast's rapped meditations on the nature of poetic composition ("Rappin' in yer Sleep", p98, above) is to understand the worth and, frankly, the power, of 'rap'.

The discourse of self-expression is, however, one which reaches its limit in the ecstatic freestyle: the freestyler can more usefully be thought of as exceeding their self-ness, rather than simply expressing it. The discourse of self-expression can be thought of as being both a useful means of legitimising various practices, as I have been arguing, and also, more immediately, as a means of explaining and accounting for an intensely felt experience. Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of the voice, of the spoken word, is here rendered in flesh. The freestyler, far from finding a self at the heart of their performance, finds a void, or, more constructively, and in their terms, a flow. Even Ser Reck's non-freestyled verse in the above-mentioned 'Rappin' in yer Sleep' reveals the anxiety at the heart of the discourse: the rapper
concedes that his rhymes actually come from his dreams, from without his self. This potentially damaging admission is recovered by his reassertion of his writerly authority:

My skull as my barricade so you can't invade.

Even though his raps come from somewhere other than his fully conscious 'self', they do come from inside his head; thus Ser Reck successfully negotiates the potential otherness of what Barthes (1972) called the "middle voice": the speech that is neither your own, nor the simple recital of someone else's speech, but that which speaks through you, leading you away from your self.

And of course, not every freestyle reaches this pitch of ecstatic intensity. Moments of flow are cherished, celebrated, mythologised, as Moore suggests. More often than not, rhymers fall short of this ec-stasis, and they find themselves working as themselves, as it were; perhaps operating strategically, as Moore suggests is the case in rock improvisation, falling back on reliable, rehearsed grabs, familiar rhymes; the stock phrases that appear, like safety rings thrown from a passing boat, easing the rhymer through difficult territory, giving them time to think up something, to plan ahead. The rhyme in such instances is Bakhtin's principle of heteroglossia embodied: a collection of quoted speech/rap strung together, a dialogic textuality that resolves into monologism in order to conform to a discourse of self-expression through the interpolation of the discourse of individual 'style'.

And it is this interpolation that I am interested in: the claiming of a moment marked as, and experienced as, ecstatic. The refrain of the flow, its potential to move beyond, to the point at which it is impossible to say anything of it other than it is flow, is territorialised by narrative, is made music: the excess of being is articulated to a meaning: this is Hip Hop.

I quoted J.U. before, arguing that
you have to try to remember that the Hip Hop Community, it's a fucking sensitive thing man, because you're dealing with egos, that's what rappers are man, they're egos...

But that's in the context of a discussion about the 'Hip Hop Community'. And J.U. telling me that “it's the words, man, it's all about the words” is in the context of a discussion about 'Hip Hop Culture'. These are explanations, very respectable ones, for being into, for believing in something called Hip Hop. For, phenomenologically, it's not simply about the words at all. ‘It’s’ about these moments, this flow, this flight from ego, the feeling of being lead away by the energy of the rhyme . . . Perhaps this is why rappers take new names: to paper over, or to recover this flight, to claim it back: Pewbic is 'really' Ben; J.U. 'is' Ed, The Sleeping Monk is Raoul. The ecstatic, intense experience is a leaving behind of ‘Raoul’ and being The Sleeping Monk for a few seconds, experiencing self as a flow. The words here are the devices for getting there, to that state.14

The moments of flow are framed. Between these bursts of flight, the other rappers (it's always someone else, it seems) grab the microphone, ejaculating “Sydney stylee!” or “code of the street!”, “word up. J.U. kicking the fat styles!”. Again and again, the performances are book-ended (remember, this session is going live to air as well: “this is the live crazy freestyle stylees!”) within a range of discourses. The expression of individual style is celebrated: “now it's time for The Monk, the Drunken Monk with his freeeee-style, the crazy high g galactic freeee-style” announces another rhymer. A sense of collective style is constructed, a kind of house style circumscribing all the individual styles (“Sydney stylee!”). When Raoul busted a rhyme in Spanish, there was a general enthusiasm: the room broke into a round of “yeahs” and “alrights”. Raoul described his contribution as “international flavour”, and J.U. moved quickly to claim the moment: “that's the Sydney style, man”, and repeated himself for emphasis, tagging on an advertisement for his shop: “Sydney style . . . check it out at The Lounge Room!” Raoul responded in kind: “At the Lounge Room
... remember The Lounge Room. It’s the new shop for all you Hip Hop fiends. If you want your daily drug intake, see my man DJ Blaze at the Lounge Room.” And both Raoul and Ed stepped back from their microphones. Ed stands directly in front of Raoul, and they exchange a handshake, gently slapping hands, as Ed nodded his approval.

The shared ‘style’ is not only framed geographically, locating the performances within the discourse of place (“Sydney”, or, even more specifically, within the micro-geographics of the Sydney scene: “around the east!”), but located within a discourse of culture: another rhymer, in a reflective mood, takes the microphone and thanks the audience: “big word up to everybody tuning in . . . thanks for supporting more freestyles”. What is going on in here, he explains, is the “real thing”:

you can leave the ballads to Rick Price, you can leave the ill shit to Peter André and if you want to chill with the real shit, you can get down to the Fonke Nomads, the Urban Poets, the Sabotage, the Mama’s Funkstickles, the Finger Lickens, the Blaze . . .

The link to a discourse about community is made explicit. The shout-outs to various crews support the thesis of community, fleshing out the next claim to be made: the claim that the handful of rappers here, in this room, represented that community:

we’ve got the whole Hip Hop scene here . . . we’re still pretty small, but we’re growing

This developmental theme was developed by The Monk, next on the microphone, who offered a grand vision, stressing the realness of this scene, its incontrovertible live-ness:

Well fucken, what you’re gonna see is all these new groups are comin’ out and um, people out there instead of buying . . . yeah it’s cool to buy Hip Hop from the States but you know, keep your skills Australia because basically we’ve got the flavours, and just give it a go and definitely you will be pleased ‘cos we ain’t no joke.
We ain’t going around prancing like we’re the best and shit, you know, we just kick it live, doin’ what we feel is true. So that’s all I’ve got to say.

The fabric of a community, of a culture is built up around these performative moments. The *aporaic*, open, performative moment of becoming is sutured to a pedagogic narrative within which the immediacy of the experience is adduced as conclusive, unmediated evidence for the ontological precedence of the object of that narrative: Hip Hop Culture.

These moments are not always as solemn as they might appear. In the middle of this two and a half hour session, between the moments of flow, the framings, the earnest explanations and self-locations, there are also moments of parody. A rapper, exhausted, is unwilling to freestyle any more. His friends chide him, hassle him, admonish him, and in mock anger he snaps back:

> What else can I do, man? What else can I do? I’m standing up for my people, man, my people!

and the room dissolved in laughter.

**Meanwhile . . .**

 Appropriately, I have left the dance floor at Rap City in a state of narrative suspension, echoing the suspension of time at the epicentre of the grooving crowd. Imagine that they’re still grooving now, the seven minutes of Eric B and Rahkim’s “Paid in Full” carnivalesque in intensity, joyous in a seeming self-sufficiency, an apparent completeness and *almost* (*pace* Derrida *et al*., as I indulge my own moment of metaphysics of presence) timelessness.

And, as I move to re-assert a chronology to the events in question, of course, the track fades away (Rakhim signs off “Yo check this
out . . . turn the bass down and let the beat keep on rockin’, and we outta here . . .”), the bottom end drops out, the trebly scitter-scatter of the drum machine punctuated by an insistent, counterpointing record scratch, leaving, eventually, a sparse, skeletal cymbal crash, and a smoky voice asking “was it good enough for you?”.

 Afterwards, on the dance floor, the energy literally drains away. The metaphorical post-coital detumescence implied at the end of the track is, at such moments, palpable: there is simply less of whatever this thing was that had got everyone going, and, of course, this is the moment, the return to being, in which a discourse of sexiness makes sense.

**Break**

Now look at what happened next at Rap City . . .

The crowd had become restless. It was nearly 11 pm, and still no performances: the techies swarm around the mixing deck, plosively spit the obligatory “check one check two”s into microphones, to be met with the same ghastly electronic whine that has plagued the entire evening. The night was threatening to become a failure, a non-event.

Until someone (I didn’t see who) had a word to the DJ, and, abruptly, the music changed. In place of the muscular, fleshy beats of the Brand Nubians, or Public Enemy, or the loping west coast gangsta rhythms of Dr Dre, electronic, robotic, ‘old school’ Casio beat-box and synth sounds started to pump from the speakers. The dance floor cleared (the girls leave first), both in response to the edginess of these new beats (their clinical precision, perhaps, their synthesised clean-ness), and to the whisper passing through the room . . . A crowd formed around the edge of the dance floor: some of the boys were about to break . . .
The glory days of break-dancing in Sydney are well and truly in the past. Back in 'tha dayz', breakers would gather on the forecourts of office blocks, in parks, in peoples' loungerooms when their parents were out for the evening. A strip of linoleum would be rolled out, an 'old school' track put on the turntable, or a compilation tape slipped into a ghetto blaster. The crews would gather to 'battle', breakers going head to head in contests, the winner being whoever could produce the most astonishing move. These are the days mythologised in raps, hearkened back to in conversation. Def Wish raps:

A crew rides the last car to take part in another part of a culture
Where Puma tracksuits prevail from the closet, Jem R.O.C.K.
Enter the battlegrounds on the lino
Into the pocket the beanie and the padding for the cherry on my shoulder blade
Vame, slap over the cross fade
The crowd gathers round, two crews stand face to face
The first round—both sides on the all-out attack
Head rocks, flares, spinning on their head and back.
Swords clash as the clouds of dust rise
Sweat drips from the veterans on one side
The crowd thought it died chills going up their spine
Veterans seeking the crown (it's mine)
Getting chanted from both sides of the circle of hell
Many slipped up and fell
Round about the time to go another round and about
Gradually one by one another breaker gets taken out
One battle to go down in history
Known as the dance floor that turned into a slayer dome
Sooner or later one side must descend
An old soldier put his crew at risk to defend the crown
Sharpened his blade, step to the centre
Then silence flowed through the gathering (what do I do?)
Feel the vibes—pulled off a move never seen to man's eyes
The other side had a hearse awaiting them
Doors slam—off to the mausoleum
Encores for more wars
Perennial cross swords
Note also that Die C's contribution to this track:

... hard core combat in a perennial war
Wet paint and smell of rivalry
As pieces go up side by side...

... uses the same combative metaphors to describe graffiti battles, suggesting the kind of homologous relationship between the two practices that I want to call (after Feld) an 'iconicity of style'. Die C also explicitly develops the nostalgic tone of Def Wish's rhyme:

Breaking was just a dying craze to the majority
But a minority survive...

The implication is clear: this crew is part of that minority prepared to maintain the culture through a performative maintenance of the practices of Hip Hop Culture.

At Rap City, where circumstances and technology are conspiring to prevent such a performance (of rapping), Paul (Ser Reck) steps, marking out a space on the floor with a series of triangular square dance-like moves. His legs cross each other with each jerky step, steps which seem to be charged with, at the risk of cliche, a certain electricity: each leg snaps into place at the completion of the step, the other leg ticked into motion seemingly at the knee, which leads into the next step, creating a strange, awkward, almost bobbing quality of movement informing an overall, speedy, precise, focused but somehow shambling attitude. Forwards, across, back again, eyes down, concentrating, concentrating on the beat, building, building, his breathing, and (you can feel it) his heart reaching towards the moment of synthesis with the music. His arms scissor the air on either side of his body. His eyes are focussed on the floor immediately in front of him, his body electric as he negotiates the beat, builds himself towards the first move. This preparatory moment is familiar: a curious blending of the extraordinarily tense, with a kind of strutting languidity. It is almost the break-dancer's equivalent to the capoiera ginga, that series of movements with which the capoierista prepares himself.
for the sudden movement to come, establishing a kind of balance in imbalance (Lewis 1992).

And he throws himself forward, onto the floor. Balancing on his palms, the veins in his forearms in high relief, Ser Reck spins, his legs cartwheeling around each other as he steps from hand to hand, his pony tail flailing behind him; and then he flicks himself around, back to the floor, kicking his feet out in front of him in a sweaty burlesque of a Cossack dance. The few, fleeting seconds of frenzy over, Ser Reck leaps forward onto his feet, all jumping energy, and saunters to the side of now empty dancefloor, and another breaker steps forward.

The music to which these breakers move is not at all ‘funky’, in the way that Eric B and Rakim tap into a loose, smooth, sensuous, sex-sweat-slicked, somehow African-American-signifying thing... break dancing is perhaps less about the sustained, the ‘flow’ (See Rose 1994: 38) the cumulative, intensional, repetitive, insistent, ‘plateau-nic’ groove of the drums than ejaculatory bouts of fevered, tight-bodied, angular, striated15, work-sweated “ruptures in line” (Rose 1994: 38).

Watching this particular performance is like watching a demonstration of entropy in action. The breaker seems to be engaged in a struggle against the ground, against the gravity that threatens to slow and eventually halt their frenzy of motion. To break is to throw one’s body and strength into a few hectic moments of improbable defiance, pushing physiological limits, defying propriety in taking care of one’s body. Die C raps:

Roll out the lino
Break, break
Heads turn
Crack open our heads on the pavement
And burn backs

(“Runnin Amok” from Knights of the Underground Table )
A back is *burnt* when the breaker spins off the unrolled lino onto carpet, onto concrete or grass. (A great graffiti piece is called a *burner*). But at 'Rap City', the dance floor is smooth and forgiving. The spinning, twisting, jerking, spasming bodies fight gravity, literally spending themselves, the dancer lifting himself up from his final pose, dusting himself off, picking up a discarded cap, grimacing and rubbing a burnt knee or elbow, chest heaving, drawing gulping breaths as the rest of the crew clap him on the back and nod approval.

The breakers (there are about six of them here tonight) take it in turns on the floor. This, it is clear, is no competition: it's an exhibition. Breaking here, is to the dancefloor groove as music is to the refrain. Def Wish is next. He has long since mastered the 'freeze', abruptly coming to a halt, effecting a nonchalant calm belied by his sweat-slicked forehead, the throbbing, distended veins in his forearms and at his temples. Jean Baudrillard has described, in characteristically apocalyptic terms, just this moment, in his account of his travels across America:

> 'Break-dancing' is a feat of acrobatic gymnastics. Only at the end do you realize it was actually dancing, when the dancer freezes into a lazy, languid pose (elbow on the ground, head nonchalantly resting in the palm of the hand, the pose you see in Etruscan tombs). The way they suddenly come to a halt like this is reminiscent of Chinese opera. But the Chinese warrior comes to a halt at the height of the action in a heroic gesture whereas the breakdancer stops at the slack point of his movements and the gesture is derisive. You might say that in curling up and spiralling around on the ground like this they seem to be digging a hole for themselves within their own bodies, from which to stare out in the ironic, indolent pose of the dead. (Baudrillard 1988: 19)

But in Def Wish's execution of this same moment there is little derision, little irony, little indolence. This breaking, here, in an inner-city club in Sydney in late 1994, is not the smug postmodern parody Baudrillard is so eager to diagnose, but an earnest celebration of what is understood as, is constructed as, a *tradition*. 

3 4 2
The "nonchalance" of the pose, its "languid[ity]" is instead, in this context, a gesture of mastery, of *style* or *skills*, to use the critical language of Hip Hop: the ability to affect a sudden, unexpected (but expected) resolution of dervish-like activity into stillness (Baudrillard's reference to Etruscan coroplasty might not be so out of place: Def Wish is presenting his own performance here as an embodied cultural archaeology). And again the trope of the pause, or break, appears, emerging as a stylistic constant, fuelling the watcher's desire for more, just as the break in the rap suspends the listener, all the better to throw them into the next refrain, laying out the territory into which the music and voice will unfold.16

At Rap City, the exhibition is interrupted. A microphone check booms across the space, and it looks like the evening's programme is about to start (at last). The last breaker picks himself up, reclaims his baseball cap, dusts off his tracksuit pants. Another claps him on the back and he deferentially shrugs, as if to say 'just doing my job', or 'well, someone's gotta do it'. And I overhear someone else, another b-boy on the edge of the crowd who had been getting ready to take to the floor say to the person next to him "mate, I'm glad I didn't have to step . . . I haven't breaked for years."

*The Groove*

Now, however, I want to qualify my rather celebratory account of the dancefloor, of the freestyle as moments of transcendence. I italicised, in the passage from Bakhtin (p319, above) which describes the exchange of bodies and loss of self in the carnival crowd, the words "the pressing throng acquires a certain meaning." For events like this always take place within a context, a context which gives the throng its meaning, or rather, a context framing
the event. Canetti, too, issues a cautionary *caveat* to his own account; the discharge, he warns, is based upon an illusion:

> the people who suddenly feel equal have not really become equal; nor will they *feel* equal for ever (*op cit* 19)

I have suggested that the affective density of these moments is recuperated or appropriated by interpretation. The (potentially? phenomenologically) transgressive moment is captured, its potential (for) becoming, and (for) otherness colonised, subsumed to master discourses, located within the narratives of culture and community; a theory/practice binarism is invoked, whereby affect/experience is accounted for in terms of logics and discourses drawn from the contextualising 'ideoscape'. For, of course, notwithstanding the idealism of Bakhtin's account, not everybody comes to such a moment identically: the 'hard-core b-boys', for example, are not so immediate in their (surrender?) response to the beats as the teenage women, for whom dancing is (meta-)culturally sanctioned. The boys play it cool; the girls go for it. The power of the moment, of course, lies in the emergent communality of the experience which manages to overcome, for a short while at least, these resistances.

And this capturing may well be thought a *re*-capturing: Bataille charted this territory, suggesting, in his famous formulation, that "the transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" (1986: 63). Order, as it were, extends its domain through (permitted) transgression, a process through which the erotic impulse, that which drives the discontinuous individual to seek out a continuity of being with their fellows, is channelled, resolved.

In a sense, the flow of which I am writing is the flow theorised by Csikszentmihalyi: it involves 'the experience of merging action and intention; the centering of attention on a limited field of stimulus' (the *beat*); a loss of ego; provides 'clear, unambiguous feedback'; is *autotelic*, seeming to need no goals outside itself (in Turner 1982: 344).
56-58). Further, Csikszentmihalyi argued, although the individual "may not know it at the time of 'flow'", a person 'in flow', *upon reflection*, "finds himself [sic] in control of his actions and the environment" (in Turner 1982: 57, italics in original). The important words here are 'upon reflection': the autotelic, ego-less moment of flow itself is followed, Csikszentmihalyi is suggesting, by a capturing of that experience. Turner extends Csikszentmihalyi's thinking by suggesting that 'flow' *may* function as a moment of 'liquification' between existing structure and *communitas* (op cit 58):

It [flow] is one of the techniques whereby people seek the lost 'kingdom' or 'anti-kingdom' of direct, unmediated communion with one another (*ibid*).

Of course, this is not to say that 'flow' *always* functions in such a manner. Indeed, such an account is perhaps a little too functional for my liking: there are other ways to approach these moments.

Steven Feld's account of 'the groove', for example—that "intuitive sense of style as process, a perception of a cycle in motion, a form or organising pattern being revealed"—understands 'style' and 'groove' as "distilled essences, crystallizations of collaborative expectancies . . ." (1994: 109), and, free of Turner's nostalgic metaphysics of 'lost empires' of 'unmediated communion', is perhaps a better way to approach the phenomena I am dealing with here. A groove, a feeling of groovy-ness, is, on Feld's account "instantly perceived . . . [it] describes a feelingful participation, a positive physical and emotional attachment, a move from being 'hip to it' to 'getting down' and being 'into it'" (*ibid* 111). For Feld, 'intuition' is an explanation which perhaps masks the effort of recognition and interpretation: "one's intuitive feelingful sense of a groove or beat is a recognition of style in motion" (*ibid* 112). Feld's argument is that the *feeling* of intuitiveness that constitute 'the groove' is learnt, that the *fit* between any given experience and one's learnt expectations of that experience is experienced, affectively, as primal, as unmediated, as 'true to the music'.
The trajectory of Feld's essay here leads him to the phenomenology of Robert Plant Armstrong. Armstrong, he writes, sought to understand "affecting qualities and works in terms of presentation, not representation; immediation, not mediation; and metaphor, not symbol" (ibid 144). This phenomenology recognises an embodied knowing not reducible to semantics, to "meaning."

Quoting Nelson Goodman by way of an illustration, Feld writes that...

"... the emotions function cognitively. The work of art is comprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses (ibid 145)

"Getting into the groove feels so good because it frees us of a lot of abstractions, logics, "culture," "knowledge" . . . etc" (Feld quoting Keil's correspondence to Feld ibid 146). Here is the dance floor moment as experienced. The 'freedom' (from self, from culture, knowledge and so on) may be by no means a freedom at all. The moment is circumscribed, constructed framed by expectations; the groove, felt as an immediate, irreducible quality of affect, is, somewhat more prosaically, or perhaps, less romantically, in Feld's definition, a 'learnt recognition of style'. Nonetheless, this experience of what Feld calls the 'iconic', that is, the experience of "very direct, very feelingful resemblance relationships between things" (ibid 173), is a powerful form of knowing, a knowing so deeply felt and so inexplicable, so irreducible to words, that it is capable of sustaining an entire world of meaning, of interpretation and knowledge. "Put the needle on the record, and it'll take you there . . ." I am arguing here that this order of (apparently) unmediated experience, a direct contact with the music, the beats, the flows, is, when accounted for in terms of re-presentation, the raw material of the construction of the idea of Hip Hop Culture.

As I have argued, for Bhabha (1994), nationalisms are created in this moment, the potential *aporia* opened up, miniscularly in the moment of performance is immediately taken up, attached or articulated to a pedagogic tradition. An explanation for being, and for all potential beings engendered in that moment are enrolled to the national(ist) narrative. Sometimes, as in the case of the Casula
graffiti workshops, the pedagogical project is explicit. I want to show now how the pedagogic project is also enacted and performed implicitly: the open-ness of what Bhabha calls 'the performative' is constantly, and processurally over-determined, defined, interpreted and that interpretation instituted (Weber 1986). Pseudo-iconic semiotic relationships (that is, signs which are purported to be constituted by necessary) are instituted by authoritative voices, the claim to self-evidence supported affectively by the density and apparent irreducibility of the experienced moment.

The unfolding of events at Rap City saw the (energy? potential?) of this dance floor groove claimed, directed, disciplined, performatively, publicly, into an explicit discourse of 'representation'. But I don't want to reduce this moment to a play of dialectics; the simple confrontation, perhaps, staged by Nietzsche between the individuating impulse of Apollo and the Dionysian mode of "intoxication and loss of self in primordial unity" (Carlson 1984: 261). Or one of the 'gramscian' (Harris's 1992 gloss for the Hall/Hebdige/Birmingham subculture studies nexus) updates along the same lines: youth subcultural 'rebellion', substituting for the (lost, disappointing, failed) working class as Agent of History: youth culture understood as a (series of?) futile, albeit, 'genuine' liberatory gestures against hegemonic 'powers that be' ('Fight the power . . . fight the power' raps Chuck D), powers that be which only seem to allow such expressions, all the better to tie the energy of youth to paternalistic . . . what? Apron strings?

Down this path of analysis lay, for the cultural theorists, increasingly arcane, forced analyses of 'ideology', of false consciousness, in which the affective individual disappeared, reduced to an effect of language play, or to a symptom to be decoded and read. Or, alternatively, theorists sought escape into a weak post-modernism, in which the terrain of 'youth culture' becomes an a-historicised supermarket, the shelves of which are scanned by the categorically constituted 'youth', by now fully
enmeshed in the corporate logic of late, late capitalism. And there is nothing implicit in the moment of ec-stasis that binds together a community. No mystical transformation takes place, no return to a prior untainted state occurs.

The Real Thing

Ironically, perhaps, this account liberates the moment in question from any discourse of origin, of prior being, of lack, and of emancipatory return to such states. The groove of the dance floor, the flow of the freestyle, in other words, does not hark back to a more immediate, immanent, unmediated, purer state of uncluttered being, but rather is demonstrative of the virtually unlimited potential of human beings to perform their being.

I have already suggested that, trying to write of the tidal pull of the beat, I find myself having recourse to metaphors of depth, and more disturbingly, to a kind of primitivist discourse. I find myself wanting to describe the effect of the dancefloor epiphany as sexual, as primal, as hitting me in a place beyond (prior to) analysis. The Sleeping Monk performs a little gestural dumbshow as he raps:

Input is the brain, output is the mouth
More smooth modulations are felt in the south

The second line (of course) was accompanied by a gesture towards his groin.

Pleasure, of course, is that dimension of affect that is all too easily omitted from analysis of youth culture, and certainly one of my intentions has been to stress the pleasurable dimensions of the freestyle, of the dance floor groove. Zizek's Lacanian reading of nationalism recognises the insufficiency of "discursive effect" in terms of compelling attraction to a (national) cause: following Lacan, Zizek in fact prioritises a notion of enjoyment arguing that
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

A nation...

[and here I interpolate 'Hip Hop Culture/Community/Nation']

... exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices (Zizek 1993: 202)

This pleasure is not necessarily sexual, although this often is the explanation given: many accounts of enjoyment are couched in the (confessional) mode of sexual pleasure. The Monk's line above (p352) is one example; Mick E's (self-reflexive) candour in explaining to me the allure of the "sexy black man" in his explanation of the appeal of rap is even more illuminating in its conflation of ethnicity and sexuality. A female informant explained to me that boys rapped because they wanted to "get girls", offering this as a reason for there being so few girls interested in getting on the microphone. A writer tells me how irresistible his outlaw image is. Another rapper explains the joy of having younger girls at school acting "like groupies". Piecing a wall, another writer is clearly enjoying himself, grunting, half-singing to himself, putting on a bit of a show. "He's having an orgasm man!" jokes one of the watchers. "Well that's why you do it man," the other rejoins. "If it doesn't feel good, you don't do it."

The reduction of the pleasurable aspects of flowing, of grooving, to something basically sexual is more indicative of a generalised cultural incitement to a discourse of sexuality recognised long ago by Foucault (1979). This is not to deny the sexiness of rapping, the erotic appeal of the outlaw writer, the charisma of the spotlit rapper up on stage, microphone in hand with all the attendant phallic overtones (microphone-centred ribaldry is a commonplace). And raps (particularly freestyle, and particularly Pewbic the Hunter's freestyle) are often sexually explicit in nature. This is partly to do with adolescent boys, and here I will speak in Pewbic's defence, as it were: his rhymes often become extended, graphic accounts of sexual encounters, often with his girlfriend (I
have watched her squirm with embarrassment as he rapped). Never have I heard him advocate the kinds of malicious mistreatment of women recounted in, for example, some of the controversial Miami-based crew Two Live Crew’s raps, or those of Kool G Rap (see for example Stanley 1992: 182-186 for some of the latter. I have appended my own transcripts of some of these rhymes below, Appendix II).17

But let’s stick with Zizek’s observations about nationalism. What is at stake, Zizek suggests, in claims to national belonging, and, I am arguing, by extension to the kinds of tropes for communality circulating in and informing the Hip Hop scene in Sydney, is a question of enjoyment. The pleasure experienced in the freestyle and dance floor flight from self constitutes a massive “semantic void” (Zizek 202): these moments are intense, immanent, unnameable. The exchange of ideas within the scene about these moments relies upon an assumption of shared experience: a loosely defined interpretant, the groove, the flow, the “you know . . . [insert gesture] feeling, and heads nod . . . remember Fibular writing in Vapors:

So how do you get there . . . Put the needle on the record and It’ll take you there’ . . . And if you still can’t find it, then chances are, you never will (italics in the original)

Here is the “Thing” placed by Zizek at the affective centre of all modes of communality:

Members of a community . . . believe in their Thing . . . “I believe in the (national [communal]) Thing” equals “I believe that others (members of my community) believe in the Thing. The tautological character of the Thing—its semantic void which limits what we can say about the Thing to “It is the real Thing” etc—is founded precisely in this paradoxical reflexive structure. (1993: 202)

Feld has remarked on the apparent indeterminacy of speech about
music, often mistaken for tongue-tiedness, or inarticulacy: what is happening, he argues, is that "when people talk [about music] to each other, to themselves, to music analysts . . . they often draw upon [a] stock of interpretive moves . . ." (Feld 1994c: 92).

They are caught in a moment of interpretive time, trying to force awareness to words. They are telling us how much they assume that we understand exactly what they are experiencing (op cit 92-3).

These are quintessentially Peircian formulations. On Feld's account, the assumption of understanding constitutes the possibility of communication (as a transitive concept). Importantly, for Feld, this speech about music exceeds the 'referential' or 'lexically explicit semantic' function of speech: it is, instead metaphoric:

Metaphors involve the instantaneous recognition that things are simultaneously alike and unlike. And when most people talk about music, like and unlike is what they talk about (Feld, ibid).

Recall the density of similes in Mick E and ESP's discourse about their own music, above (pp292-294). The experience of music is at once one's own, but the same is assumed to be the same as someone else's, although, as Feld suggests, this sameness can never be experienced as such (Feld and Keil, 1994b: 162-165). This irreducible together-aloneness, is, for Zizek, the foundational moment of communal being. ("The national Thing exists as long as members of the community believe in it" (ibid)). The inarticulable (since non-existent) 'essence' of the nation, of the community, of the culture, is determined in belief by a circularity of logic: the ecstatic moment, framed as being beyond mediation, as offering a direct experiential connection with . . . what? An otherness? is constituted in discourse as proof of something, as, perhaps, because of its immediacy, its apparent incontrovertible presence, as 'the real Thing'.

There is, I have suggested, an affective dimension that engages bodies in this music, in moving to music. This is experienced as an
immanence which is simultaneously a disappearance of self. The dance-floor groove, the flight of the freestyle rapper, and perhaps even the heady, chemically intoxicating, addictive flow of the graffitist: all these moments are experienced as movement away, as flow. In a subsequent moment, which is also a framing, and therefore an anterior moment, these states are marshalled, explained and disciplined. I have used Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between refrain and music to draw these moments apart; but, after all, all that Deleuze and Guattari are pointing towards is an ancient philosophical argument about being and becoming, about potential and realisation. I have used this analysis to read the production of an idea about 'culture', linking my observations of the field of Hip Hop in Sydney to Homi Bhabha's account of nationalisms: the processes by which becomings (experiences, practices, affects) are located within narratives, beings, ideologies.

The dancefloor groove becomes a break-dance, performed as evidence, to represent a culture.

A flowing freestyle is recorded, its radical flight captured first of all within a discourse of self-expression, and then positioned, located within a narrative of cultural authenticity.

Refrain, that which opens up potential new being, becomes music: that which relocates agency; moves it not forward (outward? beyond?) to unanticipated otherness, but relates it to another places, and to other times, and in this creates a possibility of, and for, being together.

Footnotes

2 A number of collections review this volatile period in the nascent discipline 'Cultural Studies'. See, for example, Hall et al (1980), a collection
of working papers from the BCCCS 1972-1979 which includes an important overview by Stuart Hall himself (1980a) as well as his "critical note" evaluating the impact of "theories of language as ideology" (1980b).

Another retrospective collection published in 1986, titled Media, Culture and Society (Collins et al 1986 the Hall et al collection is titled Culture Media and Language) includes essays by Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams introducing Bourdieu's work to the English academic field (Garnham and Williams 1980) as well as a translation of one of Bourdieu's introductory essays (Bourdieu 1980).

3 Recall the net-surfing fan downloading rap lyrics (above, p129). Another rapper-producer (from a decidedly upper-middle class background) gave me reams of his own (unrecorded) raps to read, much of it perhaps best characterisable as maudlin romanticism filtered through a b-boy street sensibility.


5 Although the acclaim was not universal within the scene: one crew took great delight in showing me a clipping from the British magazine Hip Hop Connection, in which a correspondent had taken issue with a favourable review of the Def Wish Cast Album. My informant took great delight in reading the letter out to me as I recorded: "who do those Australian shitheads Def Wish Cast think they are? Their album's wack and how can they say they haven't heard 'Patriot Games' I heard two tracks off your album and thought damn! They're imitating Gunshot. The quality is crap. I'm sure that Gunshot didn't have a million dollar recording studio either. But my recording sounds ten times as good. Also, you say it's hardcore. Bullshit. It's hardcore as Hammer. Ain't no b-boys been listening to that shit. I think the great Barry Sugarman [who reviewed the album] is generous giving you two stars so mutherfuckers you are whack and do not forget it".

6 A 'voice grab' is a sample, taken from a recorded speech, conversation, song or rap and used as a compositional unit in a new recording.

7 See Gates (1983, Chapter One), and Costello and Wallace (1990: 77-79) for explications of the figure of the rapper-as-jester.

8 From this position, Rose develops just the kind of homologic 'reading' of the cultural meaning of rap music that I critiqued above (see below p323).

9 References to Peirce's semiotics are taken from Umberto Eco's exegesis of Peirce.

10 I frame, or perhaps qualify, all my attempts to describe music with reference to Barthes' expression of despair: "Alas . . ." he writes, "music . . . is that which at once receives an adjective, the poorest of linguistic categories." ([1977], in Frith and Frith 1990: 2930

11 I share Wallace and Costello's enthusiasm for this particular track, reproduced in notated musical transcript form as an appendix to their book, one of the highlights of that particular text.

12 'Theatresports' is "improvised theatre entertainment played as a spectator sport" (Pierce 1993: 3). I include this reference because of the
somewhat discordant nature of the rapper boyz' benign enthusiasm for rhyming: far from the hard core posturing expected of a rhymer, here was a moment more akin to the polite, actorly indulgence of the theatresports crowd.

13 Reminding me of a range of modes of self-induced narcosis: the giddying rapture of a whirling dervish who, accelerating himself into a state of breathless physical extremis, seeks "the annihilation of self in the unity of the One ...[the] state of ecstasy known as fenafillah" (Adelaide Festival Programme, 1996: 5). Or the hyperventilating shaman preparing himself for mystical flight; the Nepali jhankri, for example, "a being who goes into a trance, at which time voices speak through his body (Lediard, 1980, 29, quoting the ethnographic work of A.W. McDonald, 1962).

14 The drug of choice in the scene in question is, as I have noted, marijuana. Marijuana smooths out selves—one gets 'blunted', the edge is taken away. The use of cannabis is understood to facilitate the flow, to help with listening, as one rapper told me. Another explained that all the American Hip Hop producers are blunted while making recordings, so it was appropriate, even necessary, to be in a similar state when listening to the tracks in question. I note here Moore's warning against reading homologies between sub-cultural drug preference and musicological features (1993: 156-158).

Not every rhymer used cannabis; none to my knowledge used anything harder. Heroin and cocaine were never seen, and were identified with other 'cultures', often marked as somewhat degenerate: heroin was understood to be part of the reviled pub rock scene; coke was a yuppy drug. Crack was not generally available in Sydney, although it must be said that there is a kind of romanticised discourse about it. It was identified very strongly with the imaginary of ghetto life, an identification encouraged by films, television shows, raps, press reports and so on.

15 The reference is to the distinction that Deleuze and Guattari draw between 'smooth' and 'striated' space.

16 And, although I have been assured that it does (or, perhaps did, back in 'tha dayz') happen, I have never seen a girl break.

17 The question of obscene rap lyrics is keenly debated in the media, in academic circles, and within the local scene, frequently bound up in discourses of the 'right' to free speech, to expressing one's self. The right to self-expression is mobilised frequently as a defence; it is this discourse which circulates most often in the local scene (see, for example Stanley 1992, and Jefferson 1992 [in Stanley op cit]. More sophisticated arguments in defence of rap obscenity are mounted by Gates, who suggest that no-one should be surprised that such anger, misogyny and violence should be expressed by a brutalised people. On the other side of the debate, Tipper Gore's 1987 Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society stands as the model text. An excellent rebuttal of Gate's defence of obscene lyrics can be found in Peterson-Lewis (1991).

There is a subtle racism in many of the discourses about rap and sexuality, a racism that is sometimes celebratory in tone (witness Ice T's braggadocio in performance, boasting of his black man's prowess, the length of his penis, his rhythm), and, more frequently, demonising: the 'rap = rape' equation. The relationship of sexuality to rhythm, to the beats, is one to which I will return below when considering the musicological semiotics of rap.
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Note: Both *Time* magazine and *Rolling Stone* are published as Australian editions. In the case of *Rolling Stone*, articles are often printed in the Australian edition sometime after their original publication in the United States: there may be some discrepancies in publication data.

**Newspapers**

The references here are to pieces taken from mainstream newspapers. *The Sydney Morning Herald* is Sydney’s major daily broadsheet and organ of record, published by Fairfax, while *The Daily Telegraph Mirror* is a tabloid, an amalgam of News Limited’s *The Telegraph* (morning) and *The Mirror* (afternoon) having been effected in 1990. *The Sunday Telegraph* is the Sunday edition of *The Telegraph Mirror*. *The Australian* and *The Australian Financial Review* are national dailies published by Australian Associated Press. *Drum Media* is a free magazine distributed weekly in Sydney, listing music and entertainment, directed mainly at the rock and roll or pub rock scene.

Many of the articles in question carried no by-line, and are attributed to ‘Uncredited’. Often these pieces were side-bar fillers, or paragraphs in ‘news summary’ columns.

References without a page number are those gleaned from a commissioned search of News Limited files: when the material was forwarded to me, only date references were provided. Thanks to Vicky Roach.

Key:  

*SMH*  *The Sydney Morning Herald*  
*DTM*  *The Daily Telegraph Mirror*


Browne, Rachel 1992 “Koori Rap—With Talent on Tap” in *DTM*  October 6: 13
Cameron, Michael and Brad Crouch 1990 “Graffiti Boys ‘Threat to Life’” in *DTM* October 9

Cameron, Deborah 1993 “Methylated Spirits is the Answer” in *SMH* January 24: 13

Carthaigh, Sean 1992 “Graffiti Grates on Paris Rail Chief” in *The Australian* January 14

Casimir, Jon
   —1992 “Rap: Public Enemy and Ice T” in *SMH* August 19: 14
   —1993a “The Piece Keeper” in *SMH* Metro supplement August 27: 1
   —1993b “Bonding by Abuse” in *SMH* August 31: 22
   —1994 “For the Jordan Generation, Footy Doesn’t Make the Grade” in *SMH* January 17: 3


Cochrane, Peter 1991 “Rap, Graffiti and Street-rods — the Stuff of which Political Art is Made” in *SMH* August 28: 6

Couch, Shelli-Anne 1992 “Merchants Deny Racism in Attacks” in *SMH* March 16

Danielsen, Shane
   —1991 “Spray Guns” in *SMH* Metro Supplement March 15: 3S
   —1992 “A Real Rage” in *SMH* Metro supplement August 14: 1

Derriman, Philip 1994 “Changing Trends Show That Cricket is not Hot with the Kids” in *SMH* February 11: 35

de Vine, Brett 1991 “Graffiti is All Above Board” in *DTM* November 12

Dryza, Tess 1994a “Workshops for Graffiti and Stage” in *ARTSWEST* July: 13

d’Souza, Miguel See note below

Editorial 1994 “Cricket: Just Another Sport?”*SMH* January 1: 12

Ellis, Scott 1992 “Opening Up a Can of Worms” in *DTM* May 28

375
Fuda, Peter 1994 “Kickin’ Ballistics: Rap’s Other Side” in *3-D World* August 15: 13

Gostelow, Ian 1994 “Meltdown” in *Drum Media* January 18: 34

Gripper, Ali and Andrew Hornery 1996 “Wicked! The Teenage Tribes” in *SMH* August 26, 1996: 1, 10-11

Guillatt, Richard 1994 “U.S.Eh? Why Young Australia is Smitten With American Culture” in *SMH* ‘Spectrum’ weekend supplement June 25: 1A, 4A

Harvey, Sandra 1990 “New Church Smeared by Graffiti” in *SMH* July 9

Holmes, Peter 1993 “It’s Looking Like a Long, Hot Meltdown” in *SMH* December 31, Metro Supplement: 12

Hutack, Michael and Susan Borham 1994 “Generation Who?” in *SMH* February 7: 11

Ingram, Terry 1992 “Graffiti Comes into its Own as an Artform” in *The Australian Financial Review* May 28

Lamont, Leonie 1994 “Ads Rapped for Yanking our Youth” in *SMH* November 10: 3

McCabe, Kathy 1993 “Unlimited Live Sound” in *DTM* no date.

McCarthy, David 1994 “False Sirens” Letter to the Editor in *SMH* July 13: 12

McDougall, Bruce
—1994a “City Street Gangs Crisis: Gangland Special Investigation” in *DTM* November 21: 1, 4-5


McEvoy, Marc 1990 “Terror of the Color Gangs: Special Investigation” in *The Sunday Telegraph* July 15

McLean, Philip 1992 “Graffiti Gang on Graffiti” in *The Sunday Telegraph* March 1

Monaghan, David 1988 “Vandals Learn Art on Govt Grant” in *SMH* November 1
Morris, Linda 1994 "ALP Street Gang Strategy Forces Carr into a Fight" in SMH June 15: 6

Olsen, Sandra 1992 "Graffiti Rail Blackout" in DTM October 19

Mostyn, Suzanne 1991 "Now, Having an Art Attack’s Not So Bad" in SMH August 29: 3

Papadopoulos, Nick 1992 "Love of Graffiti Art Claimed Jason’s Life" in SMH August 7


Petkovic, Daniella, Kokokiris, Maria and Monica Kalinowska 1995 "The Legions of the Lost" in The Sun-Herald April 30: 132

Roberts, Greg 1992 "A Brush With the Law in Brisbane Reduces Graffiti Crime" in SMH July 14

Skelsey, Mark 1992 "Rail Graffiti Blitz After Vandal Dies" in DTM August 7

Smith, Michael 1994 "Castin’ the Def Wish Rhyme" in Drum Media January 12

Steyn, Mark 1994 "The Death of Pop" in SMH Spectrum supplement March 12: 7A

Uncredited
—1990 "Clean Machine" in SMH “Good Weekend” magazine June 23
—1991a "Graffiti Gang Stop Train" in DTM March 23
—1991b "Waging War on Graffiti Gangs" in DTM March 25
—1991c "Spy Cameras to Safeguard Rail Stations" in DTM November 18
—1992a "Arrest Over Graffiti on Police Cars" in DTM April 28
—1992b "Jail for Graffiti" in DTM June 5
—1992c "20 Students in Brawl" in SMH August 6
—1992d "LA Lore" in The Sun-Herald September 6
—1992e "‘Graffiti’ Boy Hit on Train Track" in DTM November 2 5
—1992f "Police to Hit Summer Train Crime" in DTM December 10
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

—1993 “The Dice Man is Caught Red-Handed” in DTM March 23: 3
—1994 “Senator Sees the Writing on the Wall” in SMH September 26

Visontay, Michael 1991 “Graffiti Art Carries the Can” in SMH Eastern Herald Supplement May 2: 16

Wingett, Fiona 1992 “Not as Bad as He's Painted” in DTM March 9: 13

Worrall, Hugh 1994 “Legal Walls” in Drum Media July 12

Note: d’Souza, Miguel.

Miguel’s work has been generously quoted. Miguel writes a weekly column and occasional features for 3-D World, a free newspaper distributed weekly through record shops, bookshops, clubs, cafés, universities and newsagents throughout the Sydney Metropolitan area. Its circulation ranges towards 30,000 a week, and the paper is predominantly concerned with ‘club’ or ‘dance culture’, offering listings, reviews and photographs of the latest parties and nights. Miguel’s column is something of a regular anomalie in the midst of full page advertisements for raves and acid house nights.

Rather than list each date of issue in this bibliography, the relevant information is included in the text.

Hip Hop Press

A number of magazines published by people active within the Australian Hip Hop scene have been referred to in the text. These magazines are of limited availability, for a number of reasons, and are generally available through specialist record shops, or by subscription. Some, for varying periods, were distributed through newsagencies where finances and legality allowed. Circulation is hard to establish, with nobody really willing to offer hard figures,
although it would be unlikely that sales exceed 1000 for any of them. ‘Pass-on’ rates accounts for most of the readership.

The major local publications are Vapors and Slingshot! (Sydney), Hype (Brisbane, Queensland), Raptanite (Cessnock, a town some 170 km north of Sydney in the middle of the Hunter-Newcastle urban area) and Zest! (The Gold Coast, Queensland). Other small, often photo-copied, word-processored publications surface and disappear from time to time, often circulating from a particular high school. An example is Those Damn Kids! published occasionally in photocopy form from the upper North Shore of Sydney. All of the above would be available on a semi-reliable basis from specialist record shops, such as Central Station, in Central Sydney’s Oxford St, and, of course, The Lounge Room.

References to pieces in these magazines are given in full in the text.

I have tended not to quote directly from international hip hop magazines, such as The Source (New York) and Hip Hop Connection (London), although I note that these do circulate throughout the scene, passed hand to hand at shows, stacked in piles, borrowed, and so on.

**Other Material**

I have referred, where necessary, to my own records of interview with numerous people. Some of this material was audio recorded, some video recorded, and much simply gleaned through conversations and ‘hanging out’. Double apostrophes indicate a direct quote taken from electronic recordings or notes made in situ. Single diacritical marks indicate an indirect quote taken from recollection, or else are used to indicate usages common throughout the scene.

I note again that some sources requested not to be quoted for various reasons, ranging from a fear of police harassment to a concern not to ruffle feathers. I have respected anonymity where necessary.
I have also taken some quotes from a documentary produced by Miguel d'Souza and broadcast for 2 SER-FM (Sydney) in August 1994, “Hip Hop Culture in Sydney” (Coolie Boy Productions 1994), as well as some material from his weekly programme on that same public broadcast station, ‘The Mothership Connection’, broadcast on Tuesday afternoons throughout the period of my research. Miguel’s help and interest in my project has been enormously valuable. Electronic media sources include broadcast documentaries, dramas, commercials and interviews. Those referred to are:

Annette Shun-Wah’s interview with Chuck D and Rosanno (September 1992, Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) Australia.

“Voices of Rap” screened May 1994, SBS

“The Southbank Show: Lenny Henry Hunts the Funk” Screened October 1992, SBS

“Heartbreak High” March 6, 1994, Network 10, Sydney

McDonalds Commercial featuring Nathan Cavieleri and Tommy Emmanuel screened 1993-1994


All these programmes had been viewed by at least some of the Sydney Hip Hop Community, thereby constituting part of the ‘mediascape’ informing that community.
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

Recordings

There are a limited number of Australian hip hop releases generally available, although, of course, poor quality cassettes occasionally circulate.

The major (CD) releases have been:

- Sound Unlimited *A Postcard From the Edge of the Underside* Columbia 1992
- Def Wish Cast *Knights of the Underground Table* Random Records 1993
- Illegal Substance *Illegal Substance* 1994
- 046 *L.I.F.E*. Dope Runner Productions 1995

Sound Unlimited’s involvement with a ‘major’ recording and distribution company was little less than disastrous. Inexperience with big company contracts, the associated obligations and loss of control of artistic direction resulted in the failure of the album to find a market, particularly in the face of the local Hip Hop Community’s rejection of the work as a ‘sell-out’, lead to massive debt (six figures, the rumour in the scene has it) and the subsequent dissolution of the group in 1994 (see Mitchell 1992; Maxwell and Bambrick 1994: 6-15).

The failure of Sound Unlimited to deliver a market to their recording company no doubt confirmed the non-viability of Australian Hip Hop as a commercial possibility in the eyes of such companies. Of course, from the Hip Hop side of the fence, all this merely confirms the unwillingness of ‘the industry’ to deal with ‘reality’.

Subsequent local Hip Hop releases have been ‘underground’, and therefore limited, with occasional vinyl records made at the single vinyl pressing plant still in operation in Australia. Groups sell copies of low-quality cassettes, for example, out of carry bags at performances.

CDs can by the mid 1990s be printed at a fairly low unit cost (around $3-$4 Australian dollars), and Def Wish Cast’s CD sold rapidly up to 1000 copies before they, too, ran into distribution
hassles with a major (Australian) company. Illegal Substance recorded, printed and distributed their disc by themselves, investing around $5000 of their own cash. They literally drove copies of the disc around to record shops themselves. They also spoke with me about the potential for being 'ripped off' by would-be producers and distributors, having had some bad experiences.

The opening of The Lounge Room in mid 1994 provided a key distribution point for local product. Another record shop specializing in Hip Hop, Phat Wax, in Sydney’s Oxford St, had closed a few months earlier. A handful of other record shops could be relied upon to stock Hip Hop: Central Station Records, for example, also in Oxford St was particularly popular and useful. Very few of the major stockists were interested in accepting local Hip Hop product.

In 1995, Sean Duggan, aka DJ Vame, late of Def Wish Cast (he left in late 1994), using his own equipment and reputation, set up Dope Runner Productions, with the intention of allowing as many up and coming rappers particularly from Sydney’s west, the opportunity to record and circulate their material, offering his own producing skills. His stable of crews were thriving at the time of this writing, as he set about the dual project of circumventing tradition distribution mechanisms and offering experience and skills to the acts in question, preparing them for the recognition he thinks at least some of them will receive from ‘the industry’ proper. When that time comes, he wants to make sure that they do not naively stumble into the same seductive trap that felled Sound Unlimited. 046’s album is the first CD release to come from Dope Runner.

This ‘underground’ model of releasing Hip Hop material takes as its precedent the success of Def Jam records, an independent hip hop label taken over by/under the wing of major label CBS in 1985 (see Hirschberg 1992: 118), retaining its A & R (‘artists and repertoire’) autonomy while gaining access to global promotion and distribution.

A dance music compilation released in 1994 also included some work by The Urban Poets and The Fonke Knowmaads.

Once again, I have chosen not to focus upon rap records coming from America, and, increasingly, from the U.K. and Europe, except to note that, of course, any major release from America constitutes valuable cultural capital, and is leapt upon by afficianados and circulated, played, memorized and (figuratively and literally) catalogued. I have referred to only a handful of African-American albums.

Eric B And Rakhiem *Paid in Full* Island 1986

Public Enemy

— *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* Def Jam 1987

— *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* Def Jam/Columbia 1988

— *Fear of a Black Planet* Def Jam/Columbia 1990

— *Apocalypse '91: The Empire Strikes Black* Columbia 1991

Roxanne Shante *The Complete Story of Roxanne ... The Album* Compleat 1984

Souls of Mischief *93 'til Infinity* Vibe 1993
Appendix I: Glossary

The following is a selection of Hip Hop and related terms and slang used in the Sydney scene. Most are the same as those used in the United States; those that are particularly Australian usages are indicated. I have included some terms which are rarely heard in the Sydney context, although they are known, and sometimes referred to, rather than used *per se*. This is particularly the case with derogatory words for women.

Note that many of the terms here operate both as verbs and nouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-funk</td>
<td>Australian funk; Sydney stylee. A term that gained some small currency in 1994, sometimes jokingly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle</td>
<td>Contest between rappers or breakdancers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-boy</td>
<td>Break-boy. Originally, someone who danced to the break. Sometimes ‘b-girl’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>A bong. From ‘billabong’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch</td>
<td>Girl. Generally derogatory. Rarely heard in Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bite, to</td>
<td>To copy or steal (a rhyme or style).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt</td>
<td>Marijuana joint. To be blunted means to be ‘stoned’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bomb, to</td>
<td>To completely cover in graffiti, usually tags or throw-ups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombing, going</td>
<td>An extended tagging session, either over an extended period, or in a concentrated area. Thus, a writer might go ‘bombing’, meaning that they will spend an afternoon riding trains, putting up their tag as often and as ubiquitously as possible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bomber
One who bombs.

Bong
A water pipe used for smoking marijuana. Also used as a verb: to ‘bong on’.

Booty
Sexually desirable woman, with specific reference to a woman’s backside (see Rose 1991 and 1994:). Rarely heard in Sydney, but sometimes appeared in rhymes.

BPM
Beats Per Minute. In dance music (techno, house, trance), literally an indicator of the speed of the music, often referred to in reviews for the audiences of those genres. In Hip Hop, a technical term most usually used by producers and DJs programming drum machines. I have heard dance music enthusiasts referred to disparagingly as the “BPM crowd”.

Break
(v.) To breakdance. (n.) The ‘breakdown’ in a track, where the vocal stops, and the rhythm track takes over.

Breakbeat
A rhythmic figure or riff suitable for sampling.

Buff, the
Physical and chemical process by which graffiti was removed from New York subway cars in the early 1980s (see Castleman 1982; Cooper and Chalfant 1984) By extension, any process used to remove graffiti.

Burner
A superlative graffiti piece. Such a piece is said to ‘burn’.

Candy-rap
Pop music use of rap. Vanilla Ice, for example.

Cap, to
To write graffiti over another writer’s tag or piece. Also, ‘to go over’.

Character
A figure in a piece, generally taking the place of a letter.

Chilllin’
Relaxing, being cool.

Chronic, the
Marijuana.
City, the
The inner city area of Sydney, enjoying a concentration of recreational resources.

Coalies
Coal transport train carriages, common on the lines south of Sydney, from the coalfields north of Wollongong to the steel works at Port Kembla, and to the north, where coal from the Hunter Valley is transported to the works in Newcastle. Popular with writers, as they are often laid-up for long periods, and are flat-sided, rather than being 'ridgies' (qv).

Colors
A coloured piece of cloth worn to indicate allegiance to a particular gang. Not prevalent in Sydney.

Cone
A conical metal container into which marijuana or hashish, sometimes ‘mulled’ together with tobacco, is packed, and then inserted into a bong.

Crates, the
Containers for record collections. Often fortuitously dimensioned milk crates are used for this purpose. To 'dig in the crates' is to search through a collection either to find a particular record, or to discover a new track.

Crew
Group of writers, rappers, friends. Not to be confused with 'gang'. Also 'posse': 'West Side Posse'.

C-Town
Campbelltown, an outer south-western district of Greater Sydney

Cut
(n.) A track on a record; (v.) DJing technique involving sampling and overlaying tracks on side by side turntables.

DAT
Digital Audio Tape used to record backing tracks for play-back during performance.

Decks
Turntables. See 'ones and twos'.

Def
Good.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diss, to</td>
<td>To disrespect, dismiss. By extension, to insult, slander, defame. Costello and Wallace suggest 'dismissed' for 'dis' (1990: 54).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ</td>
<td>Literally, 'Disc Jockey', but particularly, one who manipulates the records and cross faders to contribute rhythmic and compositional accompaniment to a track. A 'turntable instrumentalist', although this term would be considered a bit self-aggrandising in Sydney.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dope</td>
<td>Very good. Dope is also, less frequently, a word for marijuana, as it is in common Australian usage Vame's production company 'Dope Runner' puns on both these these meanings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down (with)</td>
<td>Sympathetic to; aware of. 'I ain't down with that'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive-by</td>
<td>Shooting of a hand-gun from a moving vehicle. See Illegal Substance's rap 'Drive-by'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop, to</td>
<td>To deliver (a rap, a verse). To 'drop science' is to rap knowledgably.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastside (Sydney)</td>
<td>The coastal counterpart to the West Side, appearing in discourse throughout 1994 as a response to the increasing sub-cultural hegemony of the West Side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fade in, to</td>
<td>To blend colours together in a piece. Highly skilled work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Literally 'big', as in a 'fat beat', 'fat (shoe) laces', 'fat lines' (in graffiti). By extension, good. Also phat'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat cap</td>
<td>An aerosol nozzle that yields a broad, thick spray. Favourite caps are collected and fitted to spray cans as required for particular effects: ] backgrounding, outlining, fading in. Also 'skinny cap'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill in, to</td>
<td>Literally adding colour between the outlined letters in a piece. A task left to less experienced writer when more than one writer is working.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fly

Attractive: “the fly girl”.

Flavour

Good quality: “I’ve got the flavour”. Also spelt ‘flava’.

Flex

To rap (“flex skills”) or sometimes to work the turntables. Shares a sense of both flexible muscularity and the electric flexes linking microphone or turntable to amplifier.

Flip skills

To rap. J.U.: “I flip skills with the crews around the east”; to mess around, J.U.: “So wanna flip with me?”; also ‘to flip scripts.’

Flow, to

To rap, particularly freestyle, with great continuity and apparent ease. As a noun, refers to the result: “my flow . . .”

Freestyle

Improvised (or mostly improvised) rhymes. Also “freestylee” (J.U.).

Fresh

Good, up to date, of the highest quality. “The freshest clothes”

G

Familiar appelation: “what’s up, G?” From ‘Gangsta’ (gangster) (see Ro 1996).

Gang

Graham Godbee uses the following definition: “A Street or Youth Gang is several people who regularly act together in an illegal or threatening manner. A gang has some sort of ongoing organisation” (Godbee 1994: 1). See ‘crew’.

Gangsta

Derived from gangster. A street character associated with crime. Quasi-mythologised bad (black) dude. See ‘gat’.

Gangsta Rap

Boasting rap over serious jeep beats, relating tales of crime and violence on the street. ‘Gangbanging’ is what used to be called ‘rumbling’, but with guns.
Gat

Gun. Def Wish:
“By golly ‘G’ I ain’t no gangsta
Don’t call me that
Not many people I know carry a gat”
“Running Amok”

G-funk
Development of gangsta rap popularized by Los Angelino producer Dr Dre, late of N.W.A..

Gibbo
An ‘Aussie’: pejorative term for an everyday Australian, characterized as beer drinking, rugby-following, pub rock loving. Def Wish Cast: “If a Gibbo stuffs our sound we make an abusive comment’ (Runnin’ Amok’)

Go over, to
See ‘cap’

Graff
Graffiti.

Graff Squad
See ‘transits’.

Hang out
A tag put on the outside of a (moving) train carriage by a writer literally ‘hanging out’ of an open door or window. ‘To hang out’ is to write in this manner. In May 1995, as I was writing this, local news reports were carrying a story about a 14 year old boy killed while ‘hanging out’ on his way to school.

Hard Core
“Always hard core, ‘Cos hard core means true to the music” (Def Wish Cast, “A.U.S.T.”). Authentic; the real shit.

HardCore
Internet Hip Hop Bulletin Board.

Homie
Someone from your neighbourhood. From ‘homeboy’.

Ho(e)
Derogatory. From ‘whore’. I can’t recall having heard this term used in Sydney in any context other than one of condemnation.

Hood
Neighbourhood.

Hoodie
A hooded jacket.

389
Hook up To get together, generally in order to record.

Hype “An extremely good groove or situation” (Jones 1994: 120)

Ill Good, or bad, depending both upon context of use and discretion of listener.

In (full) effect Working very well; performing exceptionally; bombing a lot; going sick. ‘Fully’ is used as a modifying adverb.

In the house Present, in the room, or venue.


Kick, to To offer a rap confidently, almost as a challenge (“I’ll kick to you a rhyme . . .” J.U. to Mick); to pass along the mic, literally or figuratively (“kick it to you” Mick E to J.U.); to rap a verse; to perform well; to work/succeed (“kickin’”).

Kicks Sports shoes, such as Nikes, Adidas or Reebok: “Change your style; try a track suit and kicks once in a while” Def Wish Cast “Perennial Cross Swords”.

King (of the line) A writer who has the most tags ‘up’ on a rail line (or in a neighbourhood). Often will add a small crown icon to their tag.

Lay-up A trainyard.

Legal, a A commissioned piece.

Lino Piece of linoleum rolled out for break-dancing

‘Break out the lino
Break, break
(Def Wish Cast, “Runnin’ Amok”)”

Maccas McDonalds family restaurant.
Mad Good.

MC Rapper. Literally ‘Master of Ceremonies’ or ‘Microphone Chief’

Metal Beast Popular term for a train: part of the mythologizing of piecing trains.

Mike, the Microphone. Often spelt ‘mic’.

Namecheck Speaking someone’s name over the air, during performance, on a recording. See ‘props’ and ‘shout-out’. Verb or noun.

New Jack Swing Music style closely related to R’n’B (Rhythm and Blues), incorporating rap: and, by extension, the club culture related to that music. “A dance style of R’n’B with rap music rhythms and drum beats” (Rose 1994: 17).

N.S.O. ‘No Sell Out’. Frequently appears in rhymes. Selling out is the opposite of ‘being true’.

Old School Early Hip Hop music, dating from New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, heavily influenced by European electronic music. To describe something as ‘Old School Stylee’ is to approvingly endow it with authenticity.

Ones and twos Paired turntables as used by a DJ or selector.

Outline A plan for a piece, in pencil or pen, with colour-code or colour pencil shading. Also, the sprayed outline of letters in for a piece or throw-up. Also used as a verb.

Panel, (full/half) A piece covering an entire (or half) section of carriage metal on a train.

Peace Common salutation; generic form of ‘shout out’: “peace to my homies!”

Phat See ‘fat’.
Piece
A major graffiti work, from ‘masterpiece’. Planned in advance in outline, and executed over an extended period of time, generally on a wall, less often, on a train. Also a verb, ‘to piece’, ‘piecing’.

Piecebook
A scrapbook of photographs of completed work, and outline sketches, kept by a writer.

Ping Pong, to
Mixing together individual tracks on a simple four track mixer, a process involving reducing four tracks to one, and then repeating the process to layer up multiple tracks.

Posse
Group of friends or associates. See ‘crew’.

Props
Recognition, acknowledgement of worth or contribution. Pewbic: “props are due”.

Public Style
Straight forward writing, easily read.

Rack, to
To steal, particularly spray paint for graff.

Ragga-rap
Rapping style derived from London Raggamuffin-rap. Def Wish’s specialty.

Rave
Acid House party, involving techno or acid house music, and hallucinogenic drugs: LSD and the LSD derivative Ecstasy (‘Ecky’, or ‘E’). Often conducted in clandestine conditions in warehouses. A ‘raver’ is someone who attends such parties. See Redhead 1990 and Thornton 1996

Representing
Being seen, particularly to be seen contributing to ‘the culture’.

Rhymer
A rapper.

Ridgy
A train carriage, the side panels of which are corrugated, making them difficult to piece on. Brisbane suburban trains are ‘ridgies’

Rip, to
To perform exceedingly well: to ‘rip shit up’; ‘ripping up the microphone’ (The Chief).
**R'n'B**  Music style involving singing over Hip Hop-type beats. See 'New Jack Swing'.

**Selector**  Literally someone who selects tracks to play. ‘DJ’ is reserved for someone who manipulates the turntables and records, scratching, cuttin and so on in addition to selecting records.

**Shao-lin**  The Eastern cult featured in the 1970s television series *Kung Fu*. This series enjoyed a popularity amongst a number of writers in Sydney in the early 1990s, and its imagery borrowed from it features in particular in the rhymes of The Sleeping Monk. Thus, the Monk uses the expression 'Shao-Lin funk' to describe his stylistic sub-genre. See also Toop (1991: 128-129) on the appeal of Hong Kong martial arts films to New York b-boys in the late 1970s.

**Shit, the**  With the definite article, 'the real thing', as in this review: "everybody I know who has heard it says this is the (as we say in Hip Hop) shit" Miguel d'Souza in *3-D World*, May 15, 1995: 27). Without, 'shit' means simply 'stuff', without any perjorative intention.

**Shout-out**  A spoken recognition, credit or greeting. Used to describe any recognition: a record sleeve may include 'shout-outs'.

**Sick**  Excessively good. "Vame going [as] sick as a renegade" Def Wish Cast).

**Skills**  Technical proficiency as rapper, DJ, writer or breaker.

**Slamming**  Adjective; see 'kicking'.

**Spanglish**  A mixture of English and Spanish.

**Step, to**  To challenge (another rhymer or breaker).

**Swingster**  A New Jack Swing or R'n'B enthusiast. J.U.: "we ain't down with the swingsters".
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tag</td>
<td>Graffiti 'signature', often rendered in felt tip pen, or spray paint. Also as verb: 'to tag'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technique</td>
<td>Skill. “Def technique”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techno</td>
<td>Electronic dance music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-D</td>
<td>Graffiti style involving creating a relief, or three-dimensional effect by shading in behind individual letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throw-up</td>
<td>A quickly executed minor piece, usually little more than an elaborated tag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tims</td>
<td>Timberland (U.S.) brand boots, initially marketed as hiking boots, but popular as street wear from 1992 to 1994.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tip</td>
<td>Refers to a style (“on the freestyle tip”), and implying a “serious treatment of a subject” (Jones 1994: 120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 2 bottom</td>
<td>A piece covering the full height of a train carriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toy</td>
<td>A pretender, an amateur, a novice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transits (Sydney)</td>
<td>The Graffiti Taskforce of the New South Wales Police. Originally an internal unit of the State Rail Authority, hence 'transit police'. Also 'graff squad'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wack</td>
<td>Very bad. Possibly derived from the word's use in cartoon sound effect bubbles (cf Superman, Batman etc). To 'wack' is to kill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westie</td>
<td>Perjorative term for someone living in Sydney’s Western Suburbs. The valorization of ‘The West Side’ is a successful inversion thereof.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
West Side (Sydney) Refers to the Western Suburbs of Sydney, an area roughly definable as anywhere to the west of Parramatta. Originally derived from the West Side Posse, an early breakdancing and graffiti crew from which Sound Unlimited emerged.

Wildstyle Writing style in which letter frames are distorted, interlocked and extended rendering the piece unreadable. See ‘Public style’.

Word Apostrophic exclamation, indicating that the speaker is to be taken in earnest. “Honestly!” See (Mowry 1992 passim).

Word up ‘Pay attention’ or ‘now listen’.

Wreck, to To bomb, or to perform excessively well: ‘to wreck the mic’. A completely bombed train is ‘wrecked’. To ‘wreck shop’ is to rap exceedingly well.

Write, to To graffiti.

Writer A graffitist, generally of some ability.
Appendix II  Freestylee

This is my own transcript of some two and a half hours of ‘freestylee’ and prepared raps performed live to air in the studios of 2 SER-FM, Sydney, in June 1994.

Those present are Miguel, the radio presenter and producer, rappers J.U. (aka Special J.U.), The Sleeping Monk, Mr E., Pewbick the Hunter, B.U. (aka Bullwinkle) and The Chief; DJs Leeroy Brown and D Reds and myself. Throughout the evening, a number of other folk, including a handful of girlfriends, wandered in and out of the studio.

J.U. and B.U. together formed a crew called The Urban Poets; Mr E’s crew was called The Brethren (his partner WizDM was not present); Pewbick rapped with a crew called Voodoo Flavor; The Monk with The Sabotage Organization. The Chief was one of two rappers in a crew called The Ruffnecks.

I have made this transcription from my own video recording of the proceedings. I have included some conversational transitions between raps. Rapped verses are distinguishable by their double indentation on the page. Stylistic styles are indicated (without analysis) typographically: The Monk’s rhymes, for instance, tend to conform to simple rhyming schemas and a fairly straightforward observance of metre and rhythm, and transcribe easily into a recognisably lyrical form. J.U.’s rap tends to operate somewhat in excess of metrical consideration: I have transcribed his lines as continuous streams of prose, with breaths marked by front slashes (/). Pewbick’s idiosyncratic delivery is constructed around a series of ellipses and suspensions, which I have also attempted to indicate through a staggered lay-out on the page.

Again I stress that these lay-outs are intended as indications of stylistic differences, rather than as analysis. The reader is
encouraged to scan through this material, bearing in mind that the poetic output of these crews is massive, and that it is beyond the scope (and resources) of my current project to collate all the available material.

Miguel: Okay J.U. you ready? Hey listen don't stop talking just because we're going on ... you know don't stop talking ... It's 2 SER 107.3 and you're listening to the mosaic mix ... 

J.U.: Word up ... Welcome ... thank you Miguel ... word up, we've got ah we've got everyone in the house tonight. We've got the Sabotage Organisation, and of course we've got those damn Poets again. We've got DJ Carvey, we've got DJ Leroy Brown on the decks ... on the ones and twos We've got Ben from Voodoo Flavour we've got our man Gregg B. Word up to Defy chillin' in the borough. We're gonna ah kick it off to you Sydney stylee tonight freestyle stylee so check it out. Big out to Matthew from The Brethren, where's Claude? What's up to the Newtown boys! 

Miguel: Listen, if that one won't stay up pull this one around 

Ben : Pull this one around and it'll stay up! [Laughter].

The Monk: Live on 2 SER ... we've got the groups representin' ... First up on the freestyle tip ... is Junior ... from the Urban Poets ... and me, the Monk, kicking the fat styles boy ... 

J.U.: ... flipping scripts ... word up ... to the headphone mix. We're in there 2 SER 107.3, it's getting on to 4 o'clock, hmmm, and I think we better rock it with my boys like this 

Under the present light aw I slipped I might grab the 'phones the phones might come stylee and get wild with my boys round the East we represent never hesitate \ you better repent if you drop it over the beat or faster you know that it'll have to last ya then blast ya past ya
without skills you get the dills you get the \ ills that's it 'cos I rip like the ... \ ... like the boys out the East, DJ Leroy Brown he's in my crew yeah Bullwinkle too with all kinds of hard if you're rolling round the streets bumping this like lard \ I'm fat I pass it on to the Drunken Monk he's all that, from the East \ Kensington yeah he wears the dookie hat so I'll scat, pass it on to the coool cat. Uh! \ It's like that, I'm fat.

Monk: Freestyles, yeah the style's coming free
You don't have to pay, to hear what I say
'Cos the freestyle lyrics are coming straight at your dome
Now we're using a dodgy mi-cro-phone
Live on 2 S-E-R
I'm not a rap star
I consider myself an underground dweller
I'll open like an umbrella
And just shower over all over your head

J.U.: Like the wombles

The Monk: I meditate with my rhymes surrounded by the candles
Disfiguring a style like a pack of little vandals . . .

J.U.: Vandalism that's my jism as I kick my schisms with my isms and my crew \ Yeah we did that with Blaze too \ And Dr Phibes we've arrived rockin' it to the - beat you know it's sweet there \ over here it's kinda - clear \ that the screen was seen but not the Mean Machine with shaved heads \ Yeah our man Defy used to rock the B Reds \ came back from the U.S. and now you'd better guess that we don't fess or stress because we think the East is the best.

But big up to the West as well we 'fess \ Bullwinkle my man with the high hat style you know he's going to kick it . . . \ . . . for a while . . .
B.U.: Kickin' it. 2 SER strictly country and western high hat stylee. [Laughter] Big up to the g funk chillin' in Coogee. Big up to all my boys here. This is Sydney hip hop representing. This is the B.U. with the J.U. coming through with the fat freestyle so what ya gonna do . . .

. . . when I come through the door with my high hat frontin'
Strictly yes you're gonna be bumpin'
Your head a be scratching
Because the Urban Poets will ooh ah ah-ah
I slipped up I thought I was like [unclear]
From the Woo Tang Clan
But I come back because I've got my own bad jack
And here are the facts
The Urban Poets Sabo-tage the Voodoo Flavor
the Fonke Nomads
And that's how it was, and that's how it is

Pewbic: Yeah I'm Pewbic, and I'm going to flex it with some freaky shit.
Stuck in the middle of a battle
A huntsman I am
Till the end
No weapon but a mike
Strike at me I will defend
And
Send a message not to fear
I brought too many skills for me
They're coming out my ear
Like

Which
Flow from out your eye
My peers which we look up at you and I
Ri-sing we bring
Australia not a failure a hip hop don't you
string a-
Long with culture too strong for the sell-out
Figs have an odour someone get that smell out of the ground
Yet under I wonder crew

399
Pursue more development many props are due to all of you *who*
Pay attention to our verses and our cur-*ses*
I need some to rehearse us
Merciless in the battle I'm a addict
Listen close and you can make a verdict

B.U.: Am I on the air? Because we can't be wasting air-time . . .

J.U.: Check it out!

B.U.: . . . the pressure rises in my submarine as I dive down below I think the track's fading in my cranium the pain that I'm setting forth yes I'm staring forth from my flow the microphone's wobbling in my hand what 'm' I gonna do I chill underground like the Das FX no sorry like the wombles because I'm strictly chilling on the DL tip down in Bondi the sun dawns in the east with the fat beats like yeast bake it in the oven pull it out I slice a bit off yes. For- -tify chilling down in Bondi yes the boy gets fly and J.U. the shop manager Leroy Brown B.U. comin' through and I'm out, huh!

J.U.: A-ha bay-bee . . . Comin' through we're out -

You know we've got the clout

Well it's a route where we run the fun has begun we're sort of a kickin'-it-in-the \ morning hour \ it's not sour sweet and tasty \ a-throw another break g

BU.: A-ha-ha-ha Ha yeah back for more later!

J.U.: Code of the street!

Mr E.: Hence to commence the soliloquy
Bringin' a brief history
Mystery defender down [This drawn out]
Listen t'ne [faster]
The negative \ relative to positive
Vertical superlative
Learn \ from the negative 
Vibe antithesis sister and brother 
Us and we and them . . . 
. . . as individuals, 
Playing a loop and along 
Just going so-lo so low 
That the only way to go is go up 
From the playground 
Get a renown found the 
Rockin' the sandpit 
From the dark hit 
spo-spo la hi-ho Silver away we go 
Know the way that we play 
Stay around and for ups 
Locks up ama sa in the true meaning of the word 
What up su-blitin subliminal 
Minimal fus jus sus in te hermanos

The Monk: 
My style viscously flows, goes up your nose 
The dirty smelly funk supplied by The Monk 
Vindicator of the streets 
I attenuate my styles 
More confusing than a episode of "X-Files" 

("X-Files, X-Files" echoes Pewbic). 

Secreting brain impulses like a roller coaster 
Don't fuck around 
Or you'll get pinned like a poster 
Wrecking shit up with the poets from the urban 
Lyrical lockjaws hug your head like a turban. 
Hard core connoisseur you're just a bunch of fairies 
Annihilating suckers from Bondi to St Marys 
I got my pla-toon like William Dafoe 
E I O E I O I got the flow 
. . . Disseminating metaphors too hard to explain 
I give you the lyrical Chao-Lin crane 
Giving eargasm 
Vain digs in the crates
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

Maxwell

I don't wear Starter Caps 'cos I don't live in the States
Combination of dexterity
Here's a little sample
Of the Monk...
Dwelling in the temple

J.U.: Yeah yeah check two one fuck all the other bullshit

I flow like this because I got the pay-day I'd like to say-
Hey to everybody 'round the way as I swing and sway with the rhymes that I bray raggin to I bring my battle to the mike yeah skills \ you get the dills like I've said before \ you test to the floor I've got more one two three four I chilled in my bathysphere that's right down deep here I think \ that you ought to go back and start to sort the similes and then you'll come and start to smoke MCs like me \ with ease \ passing me-by in the breeze this is the east crews you know we don't snooze yeah we don't lose/ Neither does the west yeah Sydney is the best I'd like to rock it to the Australian hip hop test one two one two I'm about to be through yeah that's the mike and I'm the J.U..

The Monk: Word up. J.U. kicking the fat styles, from the Urban Poets Now it's time for The Monk to disperse the funk . . . Lyrics on a warpath causing destruction The master of spontaneous lyrical combustion Poetically approximate infinite demonstration Leave you like a . . .

[The Monk's words here are inaudible through the general laughter, as everyone anticipates the rhyme to 'demonstration']

. . . masturbation
I'm writin' rhymes in stone never just another stoner
Like most MCs will follow my ten commandments
New Jack detests me that ain't nothing new
Strike fear in their hearts ‘cos I roll with the
Voo-
Do you think that I’m a threat
When your words begin to fumble
When your palms begin to sweat
Nerve cells start to shiver with the words I deliver
I’m like alcohol
Doing damage to your liver

The Chief: It’s The Chief, back in the house with the keys
Listen to the magical cuts I release
And these crazy metaphors from the east
1994 here comes the beast
Ripping up the microphone is not a crime
Here comes the rhyme, dripping with slime
What’s the time? I think it’s time to get ill
Listen to the wicked words from my grill
But still you can’t defeat the Latinos
When you can’t seem to fit your ass through the keyhole
Hold on now it’s time to get it on
Fuck the love songs we’re coming on strong
Doing no wrong we’re just two hip hoppers
Listen to the twisted words from my voca loca
Do you hear what I’m saying
My words are spraying, and I’m not playing around
‘Cos I grow underground
Here comes the West Side, check out the sound
Profound knowledge not like a sausage
I’ve got a lot flavour better than motherfucking cottage
Cheese, jeeze, what’s that smell?
I think it’s the weed from the depths of hell

Pewbic: Sausages are fat!

The Monk: Escaping from the Temple here come The Monk
Educating MCs with the Chao-Lin funk
Devoted to the culture: **hip hop that is**
A lyrical humanoid with a lot of charisma
**Ma** styles are flowing left right and center
Hunter of the weak, the stage I **en-tah**
Dynamically dispersing deadly deliveries
Confining confused clodholes into cemeteries
Ideologist, I rhyme with complexity
Using speech, ha, doing it substantially
I see my brother Chief kicking the linguistics
Concentrating on his rhymes but keeping them simplistic
Destroying candy-coated cold caves cock suckers
Selling out their rhymes to industry huckers
But The Monk don’t care, **huh**, I’ll always be a b-boy
And use commercialised MCs **as a decoy**
Demountable element, Nimrod of the atomic
Enter the echelon psyche of the bionic
Incorrigible pugilist my words you can’t define
Let’s see if your lyrics can compete with mine

**J.U.:** You incorrigible pugilist, you!

**Mr E:** Incorrigible pugilist, you mean!

**B.U.:** We need an M.C. with stamina

**J.U.:** This is the live crazy freestyle stylees and this is how we wreck it in the east because you know that
  At twelve to one the fun begun with Sugar Ray
  But ah bullshit that’s the hip hop that gets my shit
  My money yeah it’s not funny
  My clothes not \ crummy like the cookie monster
  But I’ll toast ya in the toaster
  I’ll boast ya that I’ve got a flow
  That’s sorta sorta \ oh slow and bring it back on the beat\n  One two I think I’d like it up in my earphones\n  But now it’s red I get the bone
  It’s covered in the blue foam that’s it Miguel
  Now I can hear myself and that’s the real shit

4 0 4
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

I pass it to Bullwinkle because you know he shines on the microphone will kick your behind like the lazy arsed mule.
High G styles we get wild when you roll around the east \ uh!

B.U.: Around the east! And you can leave the ballads to Rick Price, you can leave the ill shit to Peter André and if you want to chill with the real shit, you can get down to the Fonke Nomads, the Urban Poets, the Sabotage, the Mama's Funkstickles, the Finger Lickens, the Blaze . . .
All the shit that amazes and outstands you
As you listen to the fat local hip hop styles
They come in f . . . th . . . roooo . . .
What ya gonna do?
I come here from outer space \ Yes I'm cre-ating fat rhymes
No I'm never a dis-grace \ To my crew the beat's fading out but . . .

. . . I was gonna rock an \textit{a capella} rhyme for you but it don't matter \ Because the microphone is bending in my hand
Like the fat schlong John Holmes style
Yes I can prove it to you man \ Because I'm coming with the pornographic \ Psychiatric lumberjack style \ Comin' down \ MCs thanks J.U. for the rhyme
I pass it to you kick another rhyme yeah!
Yeah boy, rock it

J.U.: I kick it when I rock it
I got it in my pocket
I pull it out when I go into Club \ X Yeah, I rock it I get vexed I flex then I \ Knock the booty yeah that's my cutie
Word up that's sleeper than a creep \ For those that sleep on the microphone you stand alone \ I hold mine when I doubt my confessions
My lessons I'm bending my flow back in \ I begin to ren with my friends yeah that's the Poets\
I’ll kick it to the Sabotage yeah ‘cos they’re large
And Ben from Voodoo Flavor yeah!
You’d better savour this, your saviour’s in th’ Australia no failures
Up up and away-ay . . . ye-ah . . . no sell-out [?]

B.U.: Flying awa-ayy, through outer space yes I never dismay because I catch the hootchy signal just in time my radio functions came onto line I’m outta danger \ but I’m coming down to Earth in my hootchy cap-sule \ so all you MCs better run outta here \ because I’m the fat lyrical ranger slappin’ down sucker MCs I know those \ techno wizards on the microphone and on the decks \ it’s Bullwinkle here to snap \ necks \ Like E.P. and D. I’m soon to cash large cheques \ I’ll pass it on to some more MCs to wreck shit . . .

J.U.: Now it’s time for The Monk, the Drunken Monk with his freeeee-style, the crazy high g galactic freeeee-style

B.U.: Big word up to everybody tuning in . . . thanks for supporting . . . more freestyles

The Monk: Dr Phibes, Urban Poets, Voo-doo Flavor
They all know they’re down and they know it ‘Cos The Monk disperses the funk some girls say I’m a spunk but man that’s not true

[Laughter]

Someone (J.U.?): You’re an ugly bastard! Freestylee!

The Monk: And I might be ugly yeah but I got big dick so what you gonna do?
But what does that mean? It don’t mean jack shit
All you gotta have is the rhymes
Stacked in your brain and then press re-call
And you can get all the rhymes back
Or just kick it freestyle 'cos the style is free
Peace to my man B . . . E . . . N
Down with the Voodoo Flavor
Now I pass it to J.U. and watch out for my lyrical kung fu

Pewbic:
The poet don't you know it
My car keys
Where are my car my car keys
Where are my cars . . .
My keys my keys my keys keys car
2 SER I kick the freestyle t-ip
'Cos I'm gonna get some s-ip
Voo-doo Flavor
I get the rhyme saver
I kick it to ya
'Cos I'm not a raver
I flex on the tip
'Cos you know I'm gonna rip
The ree-oo the dee-oo
The Voodoo Flavor
Affects with orig-nality
Check my flavour
Sleepy head vacuity social elps back a-rember me I'm under do a total
Income,
we need some,
additional paperwork
I leap into my sleepy head my pillow is my caper.
Maybe it's meant to
The chronic fatigue syndrome
Alone in my bed sleepy head I do not leave them but I'-m prone
To Voodoo lyrics it's a tricks with no fix
Voo-doo ly-rics
The only motivation, to write about my matters
I confess is my pen
It leaks a fatness
That mess up but still loyal not trouble Ben still rapping royal
See it's a positive influence ceremony for me
It turns into sentence intelligence
Not a tense sleepy head
Instead word! watch where you tread.

Back the fuck up
Pewbic is here
My name's Pewbic the Hunter with my penis
  in your [r?]ear
Straight to the point joined with my partner
Drunk and disorderly
I think we need a sharpener
Shart about it a thick skin ya shaver [untranscribable]
La de da back to front
I think I'd start [untranscribable]

And now Pewbic is back in the realm of sense:
Here I go again
Again go I
Yeah okay I'll stop and keep rhyming no shame
I'm known as Pew B. E.
Like a two-way radio you can speak right through me
In one ear and out through the other
I don't care at all you see I'm changing like a souther-
-ly change

Deranged yet simple
I'll even bust a rhyme in a silent Chao-Lin temple

Ample not enough we're known as the linguists

No nothing [indecipherable] Voodoo that's our sequence
No thanks needed pleaded guilty yes we did Voodoo Flavor if you wanted this you bid ...

... Mr E from Brethren kick it ...

Mr E: Yee-ow from the streeeets!

To the streets, originality keys to please the sound...

... and I'm down with reality checkin' it out talkin' about the totality of the spirit is so...
Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes

unifying humanity the reasonable people of society is irrelevant
blind by the smell of it the smell of [ . . . ]
Consider yourself bleh to earth
Incomprehensible reach \ speech unable to obtain but speaking out the words understands your heart looking around at the problems easily pleased by the verio scenario the stereo and video and tecking the blitin of the original case yeow!

Pewbic: That was motherfucken' bent! Ah!

The Monk: We've got the whole hip hop scene here . . . we're still pretty small, but we're growing

Mr E.: Yeah, we're getting older now, we're taller now,
Pewbic: [contralto] Yeah I got my third pube [-ic hair]. [Basso profundo] Yeah I got my third pube

Mr E.: What else can I do, man? What else can I do? I'm standing up for my people, man, my people!

The Monk: Live on 2 SER. Um, this time I'm not gonna kick it freestyle because . . . I'm pretty blunted, so, um, check it out . . .

Someone: At least he's honest

Pewbic: Flex!
The Monk: Display verbal gymnastics
Watch me go hyper
Huntin' you down with the precision of a sniper
Maintaining diversity causing wreck with my mike,
Playing a rough tune that the radio won't like
So hear me speak:
Your words are meek,
Your future looks bleak,
Make room for the meek.
As I transmit the words of so-phistication
The music I use as a manifestation
Coming straight from the place of jade . . .
Deadlier . . . than a pin-less grenade
As I jump into the conscious state of mind
Listen more closely, and then you will find
A counterattack causing a . . . coalition
With confusing dialect, which is my tradition,
Approach with caution this is not an illusion:
The roughneck suspect causing mass confusion,
War-lord of the words a savage barbarian
A triggering mechanism installed in my
  cranium
Enhancing my skills, the lyric deliverist
I go psychomusically expanding on the
  perimeter,
Fools try to battle my harmonics will defy
Listen to my flows and you’ll understand why.
Input is the brain, output is the mouth
More smooth modulations are felt in the south

And I’ve got the fat styles
And I pass it to the Pewbic Hunter
  . . . coming from the gutter . . .

J.U.: From the gutter? Thanks a lot man!”

Pewbic: I’m gonna kick a rhyme about . . . condoms!

The Monk: It’s a safe sex message, so check it out from the
  Pewbic Hunter.

Pewbic: Back to the basics like the A B C
Forget where I’m comin’
It’s a S.T.D.
S.T.D. is a slimy tender dick
With today’s many condoms
You get to make your pick oh sick
Look at all the colours
A raincoat for the little fellow.
Well there’s blue and black red yeah I’ve seen

  . . . [beat] . . . I’ll pull it out green.
Well I mean, I might think it’s mouldy
A fungi-invested baldy
She calls you a bony
It’s spearmint flavour here feast on this
Damn I need to piss . .

Flex one flex two
Let me have front seat
I'll even make your beat-
Box feel the heat
And tension Oh I forgot to mention
My penis is empty
I need to put your pension extension
My beer makes me sick
I kick [indecipherable] trick or treat
Damn I need some sleep
Beat the horn keep it away the traffic
Beat beat it's the culture it's the future it is
crazy [indecipherable] you amaze me
What you looking at yeah you the loser
Who's the one that keeps on lying
Please stop trying
There is no denying that there are plenty in
the patch who are users
Voodoo Flavour we keep you all moving

J.U.:  
I kick a-lone, yeah
I kick with my crew, yeah
We're in there
It's sort of like one two when you come
through with the J.U.
It's free off my mind
That means it's in a pasture
I passed ya you basta
Enough pasta
Please I'm fat enough
My crew needs some more
Yeah we step through the door
One two three four
I got more
Yeah down deep on the Atlantic
'Cos I'm known as the praying mantis on the
court
No not a Beastie
Boy
Yeah because in Australia you know
Poets are not toys
Both the crews that I rock with the Sabotage
yeah
I said before we’re fat like cows
But anyway how I got the skills
I pass it on, uh!

The Monk: It’s time to freestyle . . .

Pewbic: Freestyle?

The Monk: So why don’t we start it off?

2 SER live in the studio
Comin’ at ya
You look *stupido*
‘Cos I kick rhymes in Spanish
or English
It doesn’t matter ‘cos they’ll *kick*
Very fat
In the back of your cranium
I’m hard like titanium when I rock the microphone
I should be at home
Sleeping on my bed just getting in a little rest
But I have to say ‘peace’ to the West Side
The Def Wish Cast The Capital Punishment The Fonke Nomads
Voodoo Flavor Urban Poets Corn Cob Mob
. . . They’re all down with the mob.

Pewbic: The mob?!

J.U: Yeah one two one two uh!

A-one two one two

I bust a night on the mike, might not, that is I bust you know ‘cos I might cause a bust then with the locals and the underground MCs rockin’ around the east and west yeah\ South and the north as we know before they’re the best passed the test all that the rest you’d
better take \ with granny on your rocking chair I'm all there that's outta here you know you better not fear because you got it clear \ the MCs are here \ we’re not deep yeah we’re rolling kind fat that’s width \ got mirthless when we had to laugh at your lack the skills that means \ you get the dills yeah that means if you're sleek \ we're on the creek from the D L deep down here where I excel.

The Monk: Clocking mad damage with the thing in my pants
Crawling like a bunch a ants
And I’ll steal your food and I’ll steal your rhymes and I’ll steal your reputation if you’re in isolation
‘Cos The Monk disperses the funk that you could pump in your trunk
But I just go deep in the mental . . . ‘Cos I dwell in the temple
I use my kung fu skill ooh ya-ah
And it comes at you like a car live at 2 SER
D Reds cuts the wax, and I just kick the hard facts

Pewbic: With your fat penis!

The Monk: And now I'm going to kick a rhyme for you . . . see if you like it . . . it’s in Spanish . . .

Pewbic: Speak English! . . . What's he saying?

The Monk: International flavour

J.U.: That's the Sydney style, man . . . Sydney style . . . check it out at The Lounge Room!

The Monk: At the Lounge Room . . . remember The Lounge Room. It's the new shop for all you hip hop fiends. If you want your daily drug intake, see my man DJ Blaze at the Lounge Room.

J.U.: Just lounging, full lounging . . . yeah boys . . . big up to the crazy styles
Ah yeah a ha ha ha rock it wreck it like this
Could I have myself up in the mix, please
Yeah, and then, I’ll have to rock with ease
One two step to the left, I’m deft
Three four to the right yeah well I might
Grab the microphone and set my style alight
yeah I stand alone atoning for my sins at the
confession yeah take a lesson \ and then you
don’t have to learn from the Smith and
Wesson ah yes but ah not in the A.U.S.T.
because we \ rock with skills \ that’s what we
bring to the battle \ your paddle yeah through
ya mallet then I \ gotta mash ya and bash ya
and lay you out on the table with my skills cos
I know that I’m able . . .

Pewbic:  [uptown] ... he’s able ... [uptown] ... he’s able ... 
The Monk: Fat skills man

Pewbic:  ... he’s able ... The Poets, boy.
The Monk: Kick it man . . .

Pewbic:  Thrifty responses on the mike my style is
lifted with the verbal entourage around
me fill ... a . . . city
Pity our culture is exploded and sold out
It’s about time all the traitors who have done
malicious damage [untranscribable] the
famous Kurtis Blow
What an old school dream know what I mean?
I know how it feels, our skills are guilty of a
science penalty
Lyrics with alliance defiance by my brothers
many others [untranscribable]
compensation
It takes dedication by a nation
The industry is blunt,
Punt us and I’m a hunt-sman damn and we
cause disqualification
Embarrassment for hip hop is sorry around the
nation
J.U.: word up! . . . Kick the verballistics! Original . . .

Original when I \ step for my fill \ Wake up in the morning, you’re yawning stretch ‘cos you have to retch and then loose and limber yeah I begin to \ quiver in anticipation of my, creation crustaceans the cacophony of a cascade \ yeah I’m not played because maybe I’m frayed at the edges the hedges will hedge your bet yeah \ you’d better hep that I get the R E P rep with my brothers from the East side \ we reside realising rhymes \ where they hide in my mind \ I pass it to the Monk drunk and on the mike he’s got the skills to set the crowd alight \ and the fly girly is doing a dance for him yeah rock it ah . . .

The Monk: Here we go on the freestyle tip

Whatcha gonna do
It’s The Monk, dispersing the Chao-Lin techniques
Coming for your feet
If it makes you move if it makes you groove or if it makes you sit down and think

When I put the ink onto the paper
It burns and gives you the vapour
‘Cos the rhymes are coming out straight out of my carvessa
That’s why you are lesser ‘cos you don’t practise your skills
If I was a fish I’d probably have gills and I’d flow in the water
Fake MCs I will slaughter
‘Cos I’m pretty amped up at the moment
But I won’t show it
Because I’ve got the tech-nique
Not the bad physique . . .

Well fucken, what you’re gonna see is all these new groups are comin’ out and um, people out there instead of buying . . . yeah it’s cool to buy hip hop from the States but you know, keep your skills Australia because basically we’ve got the flavours,
and just give it a go and definitely you will be pleased ‘cos we ain’t no joke. We ain’t going around prancing like we’re the best and shit, you know, we just kick it live, doin’ what we feel is true. So that’s all I’ve got to say.¹


D Reds: Too many, too many . . .

The Monk: Too many to name . . too many to name . . . but some don’t bother to be named . . .

Someone: Name one!

Someone else: Abby Tucker!²

Mr E.: Yeah! She’s got the mad skills, man!

Someone: East 17 in the house!

Pewbic: That’s going a bit too far . . .

Mr E.: We’ll all be there signing autographs.

Pewbic: . . . at my lounge room with my grandma and . . . I want to say ‘what’s up’ to the transits . . . peace to the transits out there . . .” [!]" 

Mr E: Ah, what do you mean?!

Pewbic: The S. I. M. O. N.
And I’m back again with the B. E. N. . . .
Footnotes

1 [Ser Reck from another time]: Australia’s no joke ... we’re not just a bunch of try-hards here who don’t know what they’re on about. We’ve been into the culture for a while we know what we’re talking about. I don’t want people to come up to me and say “man you’re not black you can’t rap”, man that’s bullshit man I can prove that I’ve got skills and I’ve analysed the culture, you know, I’ve studied it, it’s a part of me and I respect it for all it is ... 

2 The actor who played the part of the female rapper in the episode of ‘Heartbreak High’ (see above, p 107).
Appendix 3

Letter to the Editor

This is the unedited text of a letter published in The Sydney Morning Herald on July 13, 1994.

The concern expressed in recent articles and correspondence in your pages about the influence of American culture on our youth is one I share.

I am of an age where the sight of groups of kids in oversized jeans, back-to-front baseball caps and T-shirts celebrating Michael Jordan (who?), lurking on street corners and bouncing a basketball gives rise to a certain anxiety. Are these street gangs, I wonder. Are they preparing for a drive-by sortie? Why aren’t they playing cricket?

I hurry home after these encounters to seek some solace in music and reflect on my fears of this intrusive, alien culture that seems to be taking over our streets. Fortunately, the reassuring sounds of Frank Sinatra, Mel Thorme, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and others confirm that, for me at least, the false sirens of this insidious kultur [sic] will never intrude into my little slice of Australia.