2015

Young and savvy: Indigenous hip-hop as regional cultural asset

Andrew T. Warren
University of Wollongong, awarren@uow.edu.au

Rob Evitt
University of Wollongong

Publication Details
Young and savvy: Indigenous hip-hop as regional cultural asset

Abstract
This chapter explores how Indigenous youth from two socioeconomically disadvantaged places - one in Australia's tropical north, the other just beyond the outermost edge of the Greater Sydney metropolitan area - marshal resources and find expressive voice through hip-hop music, dance and video production. In these locations, physical distance and poverty are conditions influencing the ability of creative artists to do their work, access opportunities and build careers. Yet remoteness is managed, and marginality negotiated through the expressive medium of hiphop and new recording and distribution technologies. Through their efforts, Indigenous hip-hoppers have built a new kind of network -semi-informal, political, transnational and often decidedly anti-colonial - that constitutes a new, vernacular, Indigenous creative industry in regional and remote Australia. But crucially, we also explore how physical distance and poverty are not the only barriers that creative artists negotiate. Young musicians navigate expectations of themselves and what constitutes 'proper' Indigenous performance in wider Australian cultural industries. Beyond physical and socio-economic marginality, cultural norms and expectations frame what are possible, producing and restricting creative opportunities. The chapter draws on collaboration from 2008 to 2009 between two researchers- one Indigenous, one non-Indigenous (both having grown up in the Southern Illawarra) -who brought to this project different goals and backgrounds. Andrew was at the time a PhD researcher on the Cultural Asset Mapping in Regional Australia (CAMRA) project. Rob is Indigenous and belongs to the Yirandali Aboriginal nation, in the Hughenden area of north-west Queensland. At the time of research he was a student and active member of the region's Indigenous hip-hop scene. This collaboration provided unique links and personal connections that fostered fieldwork.

Keywords
hop, hip, indigenous, asset, savvy, cultural, young, regional

Disciplines
Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details
Young and Savvy:
Indigenous Hip-hop
as Regional Cultural Asset

Andrew Warren and Rob Evitt

This chapter explores how Indigenous youth from two socio-
economically disadvantaged places – one in Australia's tropical
north, the other just beyond the outermost edge of the Greater
Sydney metropolitan area – marshal resources and find expressive
voice through hip-hop music, dance and video production. In
these locations, physical distance and poverty are conditions
influencing the ability of creative artists to do their work, access
opportunities and build careers. Yet remoteness is managed, and
marginality negotiated through the expressive medium of hip-
hop and new recording and distribution technologies. Through
their efforts, Indigenous hip-hoppers have built a new kind of
network – semi-informal, political, transnational and often decid-
edly anti-colonial – that constitutes a new, vernacular, Indigenous
creative industry in regional and remote Australia.

But crucially, we also explore how physical distance and
poverty are not the only barriers that creative artists negotiate.
Young musicians navigate expectations of themselves and what
constitutes 'proper' Indigenous performance in wider Australian
cultural industries. Beyond physical and socio-economic marginality, cultural norms and expectations frame what are possible, producing and restricting creative opportunities.

The chapter draws on collaboration from 2008 to 2009 between two researchers – one Indigenous, one non-Indigenous (both having grown up in the Southern Illawarra) – who brought to this project different goals and backgrounds. Andrew was at the time a PhD researcher on the Cultural Asset Mapping in Regional Australia (CAMRA) project. Rob is Indigenous and belongs to the Yirrkala Aboriginal nation, in the Hughenden area of north-west Queensland. At the time of research he was a student and active member of the region’s Indigenous hip-hop scene. This collaboration provided unique links and personal connections that fostered fieldwork.

Indigenous culture and cultural assets

Within cultural policy and planning, Indigenous culture has often been assumed as static rather than a culture always in creation, and to belong to a singular, homogenous community rather than one in which there are traditional and contemporary, nostalgic and dissonant voices. Dominant stereotypes – like those mobilised in tourism and cultural industry promotion, especially visual art – have presumed that Indigenous culture is bounded by tradition, ethnicity and heritage. Instead, Marcia Langton in her highly influential 1993 essay ‘Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television’ (written originally for the Australian Film Commission) argued that Indigenous identity was much more inter-subjective, ‘in that it is re-made over and over in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation’. Media forms including television, film, literature and music are important avenues for understanding how Aboriginal concerns and voices are imagined, represented and interpreted.

In regional Australia, the question is also arbitrated by geography and industry. Place is crucial; sites of creation and birth, ceremony, celebration, historical and spiritual, places of loss, memory and grief. At another level, industries that sell Indigenous creativity frequently trade on images and designs that market Aboriginal culture. This has profound implications for emerging Indigenous cultural industries and their success (or otherwise) in markets beyond Indigenous audiences. Typically, dot or x-ray art painted by artists from remote communities, or music containing didjeridu (yidaki in Yolnu) is considered ‘proper’ Aboriginal creativity and promoted to tourists and visitors to northern Australia. Meanwhile, more contemporary or avant-garde activities escape touristic and commercial representation.

Against this backdrop, what has emerged across regional, rural and urban Aboriginal Australia is a lively, fluid and challenging hip-hop scene that transgresses boundaries between art and popular culture, ‘local’ and ‘global’, legal and illegal, informal subculture and legitimate ‘industry’. We pursued interviews with Indigenous hip-hoppers in two very different places – Nowra in New South Wales, and in the Torres Strait Islands – asking questions about how they negotiate physical remoteness and displacement, as well as expectations of their creativity.

Hip-hop: A transnational language of black culture and politics

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

Locality and authenticity are vital to hip-hop. For many black American youth in the 1980s and 1990s, disenfranchised with life in urban ghettos, hip-hop enabled articulation of oral stories confronting daily life on the streets: gang-related violence, extortion and drug dealing. To traverse, navigate and make sense of daily struggles, youth turned to hip-hop. Many listened and danced to rappers and DJs playing on street corners, before trying hip-hop. As underground and oppositional, street-performed hip-hop grew increasingly popular in cities across the United States, drawing large crowds for neighbourhood ‘bloc parties’.

By the late 1990s, hip-hop was the highest-selling musical genre in America. Commercial, yet still confrontational and oppositional, hip-hop was globalised via CD, television and fashion, becoming a vehicle of expression and identification, particularly relevant for working-class, migrant and Indigenous youth. Disenfranchised groups related to the identities and circumstances behind the music; it was linguistically powerful, at times arrogant – a platform where minority bodies and voices were thrust into elevated positions in the media landscape (especially in music video clips).

In Australia hip-hop became popular amongst Indigenous youth, where influence from American hip-hoppers Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg and Jay Z was strong. The uptake of hip-hop by Indigenous Australia can also be attributed to an evolving ‘transnational black culture’. While hip-hop is a global language, positioned around ideas of brotherhood and resistance, it is also an open soundtrack for interpretation and ‘flushing’ by local experiences, appealing to young Aboriginal people asserting Indigenous identity while valorising global black experiences.

When performing in Australia, artists like Snoop Dogg and Ice Cube have made efforts to connect with local Aboriginal populations, referring to cultural similarities during interviews and gigs, as well as by making physical contact with communities,

as Snoop Dogg has done, in Sydney’s Redfern. A number of local performers have also played a significant role in indigenising hip-hop in Australia, actively tutoring and mentoring emerging and grassroots enthusiasts, hosting workshops, teaching skills and providing direct musical support. Aboriginal performers MC Munki Mark, Wire MC and Brothablack provide cultural and creative learning for budding indigenous artists. Their music advocates pride and solidarity, projecting Indigeneity as brotherhood. These pedagogies help develop slick rhyming and language, performance and self-confidence through rapping.

Not restricted to Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane, Indigenous musicians are practising and performing hip-hop in remote and isolated communities in places like Wilcannia (Wilcannia Mob), Bowrail (Bowra Rhythm Mob) and Kupunuru (G-Unit). These locations have nascent hip-hop scenes despite geographical distance from Australia’s traditional music industry centres. In these places, hip-hop becomes a form of cultural expression, a means to personal development, and simultaneously a politicised, transnational and anti-colonial creative industry.

Research contexts: Nowra and the Torres Strait Islands

Nowra, the main town in the Shoalhaven Local Government Area on the south coast of New South Wales, has a resident population of 30,000. During summer holidays the town bulges as tourists pass through to access holiday spots in nearby Jervis Bay, Sussex Inlet and Ulladulla. Yet seasonal tourist traffic has brought Nowra limited economic or social benefit. Being inland, Nowra’s share in the tourism boom has been limited, instead constituting a regional service and retail centre along the major highway. It is a place characterised by high youth unemployment levels, out-migration and welfare dependence. According to the national population census, some 6 per cent of the population identify as Indigenous, a high proportion compared with national and state
figures (2.1 per cent and 2.3 per cent, respectively), with one in five Indigenous people in Nowra aged 15 to 24. In formal education, only 16 per cent of Aboriginal youth complete a year 12 education in Nowra, compared to 31 per cent for non-Indigenous youth (and contrasted to the national average of 42 per cent). Unemployment amongst the Indigenous population is 22 per cent, with a third of Indigenous youth aged 15 to 24 unemployed.

Positioned at the margins of economic growth and social life, Nowra is a town facing complex problems, retaining a reputation for racial tensions, high rates of crime and violence, particularly in East Nowra, where around 20 per cent of the population is Indigenous. Stigmas are commonly attached to Indigenous youth in the town, depicted as delinquent, idle and troublesome. This is the background for hip-hop in Nowra as vernacular Indigenous creativity.

The Torres Strait Islands, meanwhile, located off the coast of far north Queensland, could hardly be more different to Nowra. The Islands are home to 9,000 residents scattered across 17 inhabited tropical islands. More than 80 per cent of the population in the Torres Strait Islands identifies as Indigenous, related ethnically to Melanesia further to the north rather than to mainland Aboriginal nations. The dominant spoken languages are Torres Strait Islands Creole and other traditional Island dialects. Overall, the Torres Strait Islands comprise around 11 per cent of Australia’s Indigenous population, but only 14 per cent of Indigenous Islanders still live in the Islands. The physical distance of the Torres Strait Islands from the ‘rest’ of Australia cannot be easily overstated. Thursday Island, the main population centre, is more than 3,500 km from Melbourne and 2,000 km from Brisbane. Limited links exist with the mainland, commonly with Cairns (because of air transport), in far north Queensland. Remoteness is a tangible part of everyday life.

Although contrasting wildly in cultural and geographical terms, socio-economic trends in the Torres Strait Islands share some similarities with Nowra. Again, according to the national population census, the Indigenous population is four times more likely to be unemployed and more than twice as likely to be living in a low-income household compared to the non-Indigenous Torres Strait Islands population. Moreover, the retention rate in formal education for Indigenous youth in the Islands is half that of non-Indigenous youth; a similar ratio holds for non-school qualifications, such as a trade or diploma.

In these two socio-economically disadvantaged and geographically marginal settings, flourishing Indigenous hip-hop scenes have emerged, overwhelmingly dominated by young people. Here hip-hop is an example of creativity inspired by transnational cultural flows (and attendant linguistic and political features), but forming and operating within local spaces, geographically removed and socio-economically isolated from prosperous cities.

Methods and tools: Researching Indigenous hip-hop

As with many of the other projects featured in this book, our research approach sought depth of insights, but needed to remain flexible. The project initially focused on Nowra, concerned with ‘hanging out’ and meeting young people involved in music. The local youth centre became a key research location, regularly utilised by youth participating in hip-hop. Hanging out at the centre helped build friendships and trust with a number of young hip-hoppers. After initial meetings, participant observation and a research diary were used to reflect on meetings, both in situ and out of context. These notes then formed the basis for subsequent semi-structured interviews. Six young rappers were interviewed, but here we focus especially on the music produced by one hip-hop group who call themselves Yuin Soldiers, and in particular their three rappers Yung Nooky, Nat and Selway. Combining interviews and participant observation with the group’s music-making provided a rich and extensive outline of processes for creating Yuin Soldiers’ beats, lyrics and performances.
Next, the research drew on personal networks, expanding the focus to incorporate hip-hop from the Torres Strait Islands. Knowledge of the growing 'scene' in remote northern Australia allowed researchers to access a hip-hop crew called One Blood Hidden Image. The group consists of six members from across the Torres Straits Islands. Our interviews and subsequent conversations were conducted with four members of the group: Mau Power, Mondae, Cagney and Big Worm.

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

Analysis of interviews, research notes and music then drew on an adapted form of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis focuses on how people talk about and evaluate places, experiences and situations – including, in our case, via the music itself. Our point is that these narratives – stories of place and even disputations of the status quo – are important regional cultural assets.

Producing Indigenous hip-hop

Hip-hop music has become very popular among Indigenous youth in the Torres Strait Islands, attracted to its fast, funky beats, expression and accessibility. Big Worm, the newest One Blood Hidden Image member, explained its popularity:

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

One Blood Hidden Image have gained increasing exposure within the Indigenous hip-hop scene. Comprised originally of five main MCs – Patrick aka Mau Power, Josh aka Cagney, Damien aka Mondae, Dayne aka Dayne-Jah, and Leroy aka Artu, the group have since incorporated several other members, including Troy aka Big Worm. One Blood Hidden Image work to create a distinctive hip-hop sound, mixing traditional Creole language with cultural stories and messages. The music has appealed to Indigenous elders across the Torres Strait Islands, who recognise its widespread appeal for youth. According to Mau Power:

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

To create and produce their own unique beats, sounds and rhymes, One Blood Hidden Image have become skilled at using computer music programs such as FruityLoops, ACID and Reason, which give aspiring hip-hoppers in remote locations the ability to sample and fuse together sounds to compose original beats, without relying on city recording studios. As Mau Power explains:

Well I started using FruityLoops, now we have upgraded. I’m using Adobe Edition, a bit of Reason, ACID. I use Reason for the samples but I still record [raps] in Adobe.
BY-ROADS AND HIDDEN TREASURES

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

I listen to the music, focus on the beats. It comes natural. Some days I can do three beats. I use the laptop and FruityLoops, go through every instrument [in the program], mix in different instruments, change up the pace, go through, clean it up, til you've got something ya like.

Making beats is a technical skill, requiring practice and refinement. Computer programs are cheaper than DJ equipment and can be self-learnt, allowing participants to sample instrumental segments from other genres. One Blood Hidden Image likes to 'cut' in reggae sounds, snare drums, with deep bass guitars, manoeuvring the pace of beats, slowing down or speeding up, depending on message and the type of song. After the beat and raps are brought together, the group records their music using Mau Power's homemade studio. Emerging technologies of hip-hop production create a more accessible, do-it-yourself (DIY) musical form.

One Blood Hidden Image's music has been uploaded onto video networking sites, especially YouTube, where tracks such as 'Coolies' and 'My Blood My People' have received between 20,000 and 50,000 hits, significant numbers for an underground, unsigned group. The band also sells and promotes their music (four albums) online via Facebook and their website, along with clothing and other merchandise (see https://soundcloud.com/maupower).

Their sound is driven and produced by modern technologies and techniques, mostly circulated electronically. Group members are often stopped in the street and praised for their music, and Mau Power was nominated for a 2009 Deadly Award (the national Indigenous music awards). Through beat-mixing, rhyming, performance, dancing and computer skills, hip-hop is a means to be creative in a remote geographic location far from the genre's urban origins.

Meanwhile, in Nowra, seemingly unassuming community infrastructure has provided space for a vibrant youth production scene. On most afternoons the Nowra Youth Centre's music rooms are occupied by groups of young hip-hoppers. Emerging here is the group Yuin Soldiers, who have a shifting line-up including Corey aka Ngun Nooky, Nat and Selway, Nooky's cousin. Recognising a growing interest in hip-hop by young people from the area, the youth centre has built two music rooms for use by budding musicians for learning, practice and performing. The soundproof room allows hip-hoppers to mix beats and rhymes, record their tracks and burn them onto CDs or upload as MP3s. The services at the youth centre are crucial for grassroots music making in Nowra, providing the only free space in town to use deejaying turntables, mixing, editing and recording equipment.

The production of new songs for Yuin Soldiers, like for One Blood Hidden Image, is reliant on computer programs and technologies, creating sounds and beats for the rappers. For Nooky, creating 'cool' beats is a skill that requires practice and perseverance:

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

To assist Yuin Soldiers' hip-hop, more established Indigenous artists provide encouragement, informal schooling and even direct help with composing sounds and beats. Older performers including Wire MC, Brothablack and Street Warriors were cited as inspiration for Yuin Soldiers and their music making. Wire MC and Indigenous performer Choo Choo (CuzCo) had previously collaborated with Yuin Soldiers. For Nooky, his older cousin Selway – a skilled hip-hopper from a group called East Coast....
Productions (ECP) – was another prominent figure assisting in his musical production.

One Blood Hidden Image, with most members in their twenties, have been practising and refining hip-hop over several years. Yuin Soldiers – Nooky, Selway and Nat – aged in their late teens, are younger and less experienced performers. They spoke of building up skills for music making. In the same way as One Blood Hidden Image are promoting hip-hop in the Torres Strait Islands to younger, budding hip-hoppers, ‘showing them the way’ (Big Worm), Yuin Soldiers have drawn on the expertise and experience of more established acts like Wire MC and Choo Choo, to advance their creative skills.

Managing and navigating remoteness through music

Each member of One Blood Hidden Image was born in different parts of the Torres Strait. This has geographic significance for the group, for, as Mau Power explains, One Blood Hidden Image invented their name through their geography:

We were singin’ like nobody, we didn’t have a name; just called the rap group. The original five members were sitting around and said we want to come up with a name that could be a concept that represented us as a group. We tried to find one, because each member represents one particular region. The Torres Strait is subdivided into five different regions; we have the inner islands, the near western, the central, the top western and the eastern islands, and each member came from that blood line, those regions and we were all related. So we had a blood line connection, and so we said we all one blood, with no particular image, so we all had different forms, and that’s how we evolved to One Blood Hidden Image.

Rather than allow isolation and remoteness from large cities to paralyse their creativity, One Blood Hidden Image has

overcome distance through hip-hop. Combining music with new technologies, especially YouTube, the Torres Strait Islands are positioned in their hip-hop as a musical hub. Subsequently the group have uncovered opportunities to travel and experience the rest of Australia, performing their music in Brisbane, Sydney, Newcastle, Melbourne, Adelaide and Auckland. Their songs project messages about brotherhood and maintaining a positive outlook.

Cagney and Mau Power explain how isolation and remoteness were managed in the Torres Strait Islands. As the established hip-hoppers in the region, the group became involved in schooling younger budding rappers, especially in their own hip-hop production, giving the ‘young fellas’ something positive to do against background politics of shame. As Cagney explains:

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

Overcoming the ‘shame’ factor, performing and expressing oneself in front of audiences is an issue facing many young people in the Torres Strait Islands. Those that have taken the ‘jump’ forward to performing their music have gained important benefits, according to Big Worm:

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

Creating hip-hop is accessible for most young fans in the Torres Strait Islands because of cheap technology and available mentoring.
Mau Power takes an active role in schooling younger enthusiasts, showing them how to set up their own recording areas in the home or garage. The local library and TAFE also provide places to practise music. While remote and marginal, the Torres Strait Islands has a growing music scene with creativity funnelled into the production of beats and rhymes.

While not as geographically remote as the Torres Strait Islands, Nowra is socio-economically and, in a certain way, also geographically marginal. This marginality is openly confronted by Yung Nooky and Nat through their raps and narratives, performing both individually and as Yuin Soldiers with Selway. When asked about the origins of their group’s name, Nooky explained, ‘Yuin is our people, like where we come from, and soldiers, they keep fighting and never give up, so that’s where the name Yuin Soldiers came from’.

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

Blackfella on the hunt,
Sick of being called a little black cunt,
While I’m walking I’m thinking,
Is this the price of education?
Heartache, racism and discrimination?

In parallel to their sense of displacement are feelings of attachment to Nowra and the south coast, as Nooky describes:

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

Nowra is home, yet consciously is also a place to escape. Living in Nowra is seen as a struggle or fight for Indigenous youth, metaphorically drawn out in a Yuin Soldiers rap, where Nooky cites the town (and its postcode, 2541) and makes comparison with American boxer Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter:

South Coast Hurricane...you can call me Rubin Carter,
Instead of a right hook, it’s the rapper Yung Nook...
The first round’s already won,
2541 ask around I’m the man in that town,
I’m goin big with my South coast sound,
Ah welcome you all to the South coast flow,
On the map we’re big, that’s how we roll,
Yeah got the endless rhymes, yeah for the endless crimes.

In Nowra’s Aboriginal hip-hop, local experience is integrated with a politicised transnational black culture. Music making can be drawn from daily experiences within marginal places, providing creative stimulus for rhymes and raps. Hip-hop allows negotiation of place and circumstance through confrontation and expressivity.

Performing hip-hop

While practising in the Torres Strait Islands is considered ‘easy’, gaining access to performance spaces outside the islands is more difficult and attributed to the region’s ‘remoteness’ (Mondae). Gigs have been dominantly bounded within Indigenous ceremonies, events or festivals: National Sorry Day, Reconciliation events and NAIDOC celebrations. These performances provided our musicians rare travel experiences to locations across mainland Australia; hence, they were recounted very positively.

Nevertheless, Mau Power, Mondae, Big Worm and Cagney said in interviews how remoteness in the Torres Strait Islands leaves musically talented youth frustrated, unable to access opportunities
to play their music to larger audiences on the mainland, or earn any significant income from their work. One Blood Hidden Image themselves rarely receive invitations to play at music festivals or gigs outside of symbolic Indigenous events.

To improve musical skills, participants spoke of ‘moving to the mainland’ (Big Worm) for education and opportunity. On the mainland Mau Power and Mondae had learnt more ‘formal’ music skills – recording, computer programming and professional networking – called upon for accessing performance opportunities. Big Worm told of needing to ‘get away’ from the Torres Strait Islands, recently deciding to move to Brisbane for greater opportunities. Playing gigs to non-Indigenous audiences was rare; receiving payment for their shows or funding for recording or workshops was rarer still. Members had strong aspirations to forge professional music careers, moving away from the Torres Strait Islands, at various times, to pursue those goals. However, their ambitions of becoming professional hip-hoppers were yet to materialise, in part due to the restricted avenues for paid performance.

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

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

Nooky and his cousin Selway had performed traditional Aboriginal dances for World Youth Day in Sydney, in front of a large audience, before being invited to perform a hip-hop set to this same audience, which fused traditional dancing elements with their beats and rhymes. This was a highlight, a rare opportunity to showcase their contemporary rhyming and performance skills.

Conclusion

Hip-hop is a contemporary form of Aboriginal storytelling, overcoming socio-economic marginality and remoteness through new technologies and transnational modes of black political expression. Although positioned outside dominant understandings of acceptable, commercial Indigenous culture (meaning limited paid work opportunities), Indigenous hip-hop is nevertheless a rich cultural asset for a range of urban, rural and remote communities. Indigenous hip-hop warrants being taken much more seriously in cultural planning across diverse regions of Australia: it is ‘creative’ because it is concerned with being artistic, resourceful and innovative, and involves technical skill, manouevring, recording and performing. Through appropriation of transnational black discourse, motifs and language, Indigenous hip-hop is also a fusion between the traditional (language, cultural stories, histories and dance) and contemporary (equipment, software and technologies), and inverts the urban focus of the mainstream industry. This alone is important to acknowledge in regional Australia, where there are significant Aboriginal populations. Moreover, Indigenous hip-hop enables local Aboriginal youth to perform music, express themselves and to negotiate, emotively and politically, their socio-economic circumstances.

New media and communication technologies have increased in geographic scope in the last decade and, although not evenly
accessible everywhere, have become much more pervasive. Production and consumption of music is increasingly reliant on these emerging technologies. Individual songs, albums and entire discographies are downloaded from iTunes or LimeWire in minutes, transferring music to CD and MP3 players. Programs and software help develop unique sounds and beats, often replacing the need to learn musical instruments. Music can be made at home or at the local youth centre, recorded and uploaded to YouTube or Facebook sites. In turn, these networks spread music to larger audiences, promoting skills and ambitions of grassroots and underground performers, as well as signed professionals.

Indigenous hip-hop production requires a combination of underlying telecommunications infrastructure (adequate in Nowra and the Torres Strait, but still woeful in large parts of rural and remote Australia) and progressive thinking by local social workers and community planners. In the case of Nowra, the youth centre allows and encourages young people to be creative – prosaic community infrastructure enabling cultural activity of significance. Indigenous hip-hop is an evolving musical form, providing an important platform where young musicians express identities, creativity, passions and skill. The hope of the musicians featured in this chapter (and the authors) is that in the future aspiring Indigenous hip-hop artists will have improved opportunities to progress musical flair and talent into viable professional careers. Access to relevant musical equipment, infrastructure, mentoring and performance opportunities are crucial to the future development of a vibrant Indigenous hip-hop.

Engaging Creativity in Industrial Regions: Mapping Vernacular Cultural Assets

Chris Gibson, Andrew Warren and Ben Gallan

This chapter explores the vernacular cultural assets of Wollongong, a largely suburban industrial city located just to the south of Sydney. Our interest here stems from our research for the wider Cultural Asset Mapping in Regional Australia (CAMRA) project, which asked the following key questions: outside of official planning discourses, what kinds of cultural assets exist in a rapidly changing and historically industrial region? What constitutes creativity in such a context? And, as researchers, what kinds of research practice are necessary to engage with marginalised social groups and working-class communities as part of a cultural asset mapping approach? In this chapter, we reflect on our research experiences, and discuss the particularities of cultural and creative practice in a working-class steel city that is undergoing transitions. The story includes surfboards, punk music and custom-designed cars, but also diverse suburban ‘cool places’ invisible to the creative cities script.

At the outset, no presumptions were made about what creativity might be, where it resides in the city, or its importance