

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 led 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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