

## Giving Back Time: Improvisation in Australian Hip-Hop Pedagogy and Performance

Rebecca Caines

Now, I recently did a workshop just like this in Bathurst in NSW, does anyone know where that is? West New South Wales. It was a cypher section of the workshop [ . . . ] we had a real mix of people from six year old Koori [South-Eastern Australian Aboriginal] boys to 25 year old Uni students, about twenty people in the room. We got the beatbox going and then the first MC got up to do his thing. He was about 16, wearing one of those plastic yellow Fubu tops and he got up and his rap went something like this:

"Yo! You ain't nothing but a bitch's bitch bitch  
I'd bet you'd fuck a fat bitch in a twitch  
While I'm at home fucking your Mum  
Anyway you spit it you know I'm number one"

Everyone in the room was just like, whoa, and I'm left standing there, thinking damn! I'm running this workshop, what do I say to him? So I say "Thanks heaps for your energy, I'm glad you got up but to be honest I don't agree with a word you said and I would much rather if you said it in your own voice, not an American accent." So then this sort of feral uni student guy get up next and kicks his rap which goes like this:

"Connection, connection, connection, connection  
No disrespecting women, we are all connected  
Connection, connection, connection"

So the young guy in the yellow tracksuit goes all red in the face and he says "Can I get up again?" and I say "Sure" and I think, watch out, the battle is on. He hops up and he goes,

"I'm 16, been homeless since I was 14  
Like a bad dream, you wouldn't believe what I've seen  
I used to live in a caravan eating cans of spam with my Mum  
Now I'm living in a refuge in Orange, just when you thought life couldn't get any worse, it does"

(one hand clap)  
That was it, the Zen clap. In that moment he switched. For some kids it can take years, but for him it happened in a moment and what he told us was so sad but it was also beautiful that he had the guts to say it and the whole room cheered him.<sup>1</sup>

*MC Morganics, Crouching B-Boy Hidden Dreadlocks, Sydney Opera House, 2001.*

In 2009, during the *Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium*, at the "Roundtable on Improvisation and Outreach: The Ethics of Improvising with At-Risk or Aggrieved Communities," a group conversation arose about the notion of time in community-based improvisation work. In reference to the work of improvising musicians who teach at the Carnegie Centre in East Downtown, Vancouver, an audience member suggested that improvisation practices perhaps took at risk community members "out of time" for a while, and that this might give them some relief when they were experiencing severe personal and social problems. Dr Tamas Dobozy, a presenter at the colloquium and audience member, replied, "No, I think maybe what is going on is that improvising is giving these people *back* a sense of time." In the conversation that followed, it was clear that Dobozy saw improvisation as a practice that had the potential to make room for the reclamation of locality, of temporality, of history, of representation, and of memory for those who may feel dislocated from the societies that had failed them in a number of ways (Dobozy et al.).

This paper takes the idea of "giving back a sense of time" as a starting point for a case study of improvisation practices in Australian hip-hop. I argue that improvisation is central to hip-hop, as a tactic in both performance and pedagogy that is used to reclaim and re-perform history. This paper documents the improvisatory practices of two Australian hip-hop artists and workshop facilitators, Morgan Lewis (AKA [Morganics](#)) and Will Jarrett (AKA [Wire](#)). Both artists use improvisation as a key tactic in working with (mostly Indigenous<sup>2</sup>) community participants in Australia in order to facilitate community-driven expression, interact with local specificities, and foreground adaptation skills in the

pursuit of social justice. I describe my experience of their workshops and performances and detail two examples of raps that arose from the workshop process. I end by considering a 2005 workshop tour that the two artists participated in—*Many Rhymes, One Rhythm*, sponsored by the Australian Museum—in order to question the impact community-based hip-hop performance can have on historical archives.

I am interested in exploring these examples of Australian hip-hop pedagogy in this journal for two main reasons. First, these two artists are prolific improvisers, using improvised creativity in social justice endeavours with some of the most disadvantaged people in Australia. Documenting this work can contribute to the project of building an international body of knowledge about improvisation across genres. Second, I believe this work points to the potential for improvisatory pedagogical practices to engage participants in an active reclamation of the construction of social history through involvement in open, collaborative, risky, creative processes that I think of as improvisation's 'gift of time.' In this second belief, I am inspired by the history of the improvisational practice of hip-hop and how it manifests itself in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Australia. I am also spurred on by the work of scholars such as George E. Lewis and Keith Sawyer, who have done in-depth research on the pedagogical possibilities of improvisation across a number of genres. This paper also draws on important work on historiography and improvisation produced by critical improvisation theorists such as Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin, and on the philosophies of practicing improvising artists, both inside and outside the field of hip-hop. I am interested in asking interdisciplinary questions about the relevance of improvisatory practices, as Heble and Waterman do in their introduction to the *CSI-ECI* special issue on improvisation and pedagogy:

What does it mean to practice political resistance, to speak of social justice, and to radicalize public understanding through music education? How can pedagogical musical endeavours, despite the forces that seek to marginalize or contain them, work to activate diverse energies of critique and inspiration? How might such endeavours play a crucial role in building vibrant and sustainable communities, and in fostering hope for a better future?

## Improvisation and Hip-Hop

Derek Bailey's study, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, mapped improvisation across the globe as "the most widely practiced of all musical activities [. . .] present in almost every area of music" (ix). Hip-hop is no exception. Improvisatory practices are to be found across the history(s) of the artform—from its roots in Sub-Saharan African, Caribbean, and Latino cultural forms of improvised storytelling, live unscored music, dance, and ritual (Gates; Flores)—to its modern manifestations as transient and competitive b-boy and b-girl (breaking) battles on the streets; swiftly constructed, often illegal, spray painted art; music mixed live; and spontaneous, multi-authored performances of improvised "freestyle" rapping and beatboxing inside impromptu "cypher" circles (Toop; Hager; Chang; Rose, *Black Noise*). Hip-hop has strong links with other forms of African-American oral and cultural expression where improvisation is a central feature. Jazz historian Eluard Burt II, for example, in Fitzgerald's film *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*, links freestyle rap to African-American Baptist preaching, experimental jazz music, and spoken word poetry, naming freestyling as "just a stem on the branch of what we are all about":

Freestyle, where you just respond to the impulse has to be the most spiritual right? Because you have no idea what you are going to say next because it is coming from something that is not directed, and this is what most of our creative expression does, it is so spiritual, we don't need a book, we don't need an explanation, we are musicians, we are artisans, we are poets.

Hip-hop scholars also emphasize the vital links between the improvisatory art form of hip-hop and the intertwined acts of social improvisation occurring in areas where hip-hop has been documented. Mark Anthony Neal sees these daily improvisatory negotiations, hustles, dialogues, and creative spontaneous problem-solving activities occurring in impoverished neighbourhoods in the US where hip-hop began as ways of "analytically and critically read[ing] urban landscapes in ways that produce creative options for survival and forms of social resistance [. . .] that are not planned" (209). Recent hip-hop scholarship has produced numerous case studies documenting how these hip-hop tactics are created by and subsequently produce new social practices to deal with overwhelming obstacles and challenges resulting from a history of slavery, (post) colonialism, poverty, and/or structural racism in the USA and in other contexts (Kitwana; Asante; Pardue; Neal; Rose, "Voices from the Margins").

Improvisation, as discussed in this paper, refers to a process of collaborative, real-time, spontaneous, creative activity. The artists I discuss, however, use improvisation in a number of different ways: in rehearsals/workshops in order to help participants to express themselves and to share and hone techniques; as a tool for developing "compositions" of music/lyrics and for developing new dance works (although in the examples I analyse the compositions and choreographies are rarely fixed); and in collaborative, spontaneous "performances" of freestyle rap,

beatboxing, DJing, and b-boying/b-girling. These improvised performances occur within workshops and homes, in private performances for families/peers/organisers, and in public performance events. They are idiomatic activities shaped and constricted by the field of global hip-hop culture and consumption and by local factors, as I discuss below. These different activities do not occur separately, or in any particular hierarchy, but take place continuously alongside other non-improvisatory activities such as composition, rehearsal, and the performance of prepared material. This blurring of formal and informal performance practices and pedagogical activities and the mix of improvised and non-improvised creative expression have been features of hip-hop since its birth in African-American, Caribbean, and Hispanic urban communities in the USA (Chang; Rose).

## Improvised Histories of Australian Hip-Hop

Any broad narrative of improvisation's place in hip-hop is usefully complicated once applied to specific local situations. Australian cultural scholar and music theorist Tony Mitchell sees hip-hop as a globalised, or perhaps what Roland Robertson would call a "globalized," phenomenon, where US-based hip-hop techniques and images have travelled across the world to merge and change in each new location as they meet indigenous art forms, forming new hip-hop traditions that move far from their US roots (Mitchell, *Global Noise* 33; Robertson 25-54):

Japanese b-boys struggling with the hyperconsumerism of Tokyo's youth culture, Italian poses promoting hardcore Marxist politics and alternative youth culture circuits, and Basque rappers using a punk rock-hip-hop syncretic to espouse their nationalist cause and promote the rights of ethnic minorities globally. Rappers in war-torn Bosnia declare their allegiance with Central Los Angeles and a rap group in Greenland protests that country's domination by the Danish language. (Mitchell, *Global Noise* 1)

In each of the case studies in Mitchell's book, there is a focus on the tensions around how to balance hip-hop's "local roots" and "authenticity" with the commercial interests that surround it. Live improvised techniques can be fetishized through the commercial release of polished music and video content. Indeed, the practice of "freestyling," or improvising rap lyrics and performances "off the top of your head" or "off the dome" is often cited by hip-hop artists and scholars as a marker of "authenticity" and a connection to hip-hop's "history of liveness more or less connected to the everyday practices of black youth" (Neal 208). In contrast, commercial rap albums "mediated by global voices where authenticity is stylized to meet the demands of global consumers" (Neal 208-209) (re)produce what Tricia Rose has damned as the debilitating, pervasive 21<sup>st</sup>-century US export: the "trinity of commercial hip-hop—the black gangsta, pimp and ho" (Rose, *The Hip-hop Wars* 4). For some, "the loudly trumpeted enthusiasm for improvisation" in black hip-hop is contained "within strict limits," and "only the illusion of spontaneity is created," as spectacles of improvisation are used to ensure marketable "street" personas for hip-hop stars (Gilroy 25). For others, such as rap artist T-Love, "true hip-hop music" would always feature centrally the authentic spontaneous creativity of the freestyler, b-boy/b-girl, or graffiti artist, "keeping the form alive" through spontaneous creativity and competition (Neal 208).

Performance studies theorist Ian Maxwell was one of the first Australian scholars to historicize the hip-hop practices of Australian artists. In his 2003 work *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes*, Maxwell maps a complex relationship between Australian and US hip-hop. He traces a "standard narrative" of Australian hip-hop history by which urban, mostly white, working and lower-middle-class Australian youth took up the imported package of rap, beat boxing, graffiti, and breaking simultaneously in the early 1980s through a number of key cultural texts (including the video clip for Malcolm McLaren's mix "Buffalo Gals," which featured b-boys/b-girls and graffiti artists on the streets of New York City) and made it their own on the streets, community radio stations, and stages of urban and suburban areas of Australia. Maxwell has traced this historical "mythology" through interviews, studies of hip-hop street publications, performance analyses, and other forms of ethnographic and phenomenological study (47-60). Since Maxwell's book was published, a number of boom and bust periods in Australian hip-hop, and a recent explosion of multicultural and Indigenous hip-hop music and scholarship, have threatened the centrality of this white, suburban narrative (Mitchell and Pennycook; Wire). Maxwell's work, however, highlights the fact that hip-hop histories are fluid and mutable across different local contexts.

For Maxwell, tracing the "authentic" roots of Australian hip-hop is impossible without acknowledging the way local hip-hop artists rely on historical lineages to establish their credentials. These lineages are created through improvisational practices such as freestyle battles. Hip-hop history is not so much about what actually happened as about 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 equates to, or is consistent with that history" (36). Maxwell shows how in the late 1980s and early 1990s white Sydney rappers shaped, affirmed, and contested Australian historical narratives through freestyle battles that were "micropolitical struggles," attempts to institutionalize one interpretation over another in the "real hegemonizing field of interpretation of Hip-hop by excluding

dissident readings or understanding of how that field might be.” Maxwell observed these artists “seeking to enrol other agents to this ‘truth,’ by claiming authoritative knowledge of that truth and of the means of accessing it” (36).

Often, this “truth” is shown to be a felt, emotional connection rather than an historical fact, as in the case of young artists citing the influence on their work of live performances or temporary media broadcasts that played before they were born (Maxwell 57). The histories of Australian hip-hop that Maxwell encountered often contradicted each other wildly and were adjusted by the artists to establish credentials, increase audience, and/or compete with other performers. These narratives, established and circulated through improvised freestyle performances, seem fragmented when considered against each other, but *in situ* I believe they show how hip-hop can provide ever-changing ways to reshape and reclaim personal and artistic narratives to suit local aims and to reclaim a voice in the construction of history.

## Improvising and the Reclamation of Time

The fact that Australian hip-hop history and the history of its performers is shifted and contested through improvisation exposes what I believe to be one of the key features of improvisation across idiomatic and non-idiomatic genres. When performers engage in improvisatory practices, a space is potentially opened for the participants to become involved in the process of making their own histories.

Ajay Heble’s analysis of the Chicago-based experimental jazz cooperative The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), for example, describes the ways members explicitly stated the goals of an organization created for “aggrieved people seeking to reclaim their history and their identity,” one where the music was “part of the creative process of history” (67-68). While the member organizations of the AACM were not solely improvising groups, improvisation in both artistic and social contexts remained a central feature of their practice. In reference to The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Heble traces how their music cited and incorporated various “black influences, traditions, and forms into its music,” producing an “abridged history of accomplishments in black music” (68-69). According to Heble, this was in order to “reimagine, reinvent and reclaim histories that have hitherto been represented and constructed in the service of dominant models of knowledge production” (71). He also shows how, through “its insistence on naming its own music, on asserting the right to reclaim its own cultural history and identity, the ensemble is engaged in recreating institutions and practices that counter the devastating and dehumanizing effects of misrepresentation” (69). Heble reminds the reader of Ronald Sakolsky and Fred Wei-han Ho’s assertion that “Oppressed peoples suffer from their history, identity and culture being defined, (mis)represented and explicated by their oppressors [ . . . ] In essence, the struggle over how to describe past and present reality is to change reality” (Sakolsky and Wei-han 133).

Heble is clear that using music in the creative practice of history is not an exercise in unproblematic representations of the past; rather, it is “predicated on a simultaneous commitment to perform, and perhaps transform the history of the present” through a “kind of healthy and inquisitive dialogue,” creating a conversation between the past and present that both works with and exposes the fractures and prejudices of historical narrativity (72-73). George Lewis’s recently published history of the AACM, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, also illustrates in fine detail how artists can reconstruct and reclaim history. Despite a radically different social and cultural context, I see a similar dialogue arising out of the improvised pedagogy of Morganics and Wire, a reclamation of history evident in the resulting improvised performance that emerges from these two artists’ work with Indigenous and disenfranchised youth in Australia.

## Wire and Morganics

I rock my digger hat ' cause my great Grandad  
took a bullet from a soldier in France and yes I can dance  
Bboy employ the tactics of gymnastics pulling backflips over these  
yobbo preconceptions of this Hip-hop constellation like the  
Southern Cross to the Southern Land manifested in the hand  
of every MC, DJ, Bboy, Bgirl, graffiti artist that ever painted a swirl  
to beautify the urban, rednecks we are disturbing  
Hip-hop connecting cultures like a turban to a German  
Samoan to Aboriginal our styles are original  
we never mimmick [sic] that's a gimmick  
tourists take a nibble while we eat the whole picnic  
get the picture, I paint it like Namatjira

like a sheep to a shearer, the chorus is the map do I have to make it clearer?

*Morganics "Fascination," from his solo album Invisible Forces (2002)*

Morganics and Wire have worked together on many workshops and collaborative performance ventures, and both artists see hip-hop as a vital part of Australian cultural expression (Mitchell, *Hip-Hop and Contemporary Australia*). They share a prominent place in the Australian hip-hop scene.



**MC Morganics**

Photo Credit: Angela McMillan

Morganics began rapping and breaking on the streets of Sydney in the 1980s and became part of the influential group MetaBass N Breath, which acted as an ambassador for Australian accents and themes in hip-hop music. He has also produced a number of solo albums and compilations drawn from his workshop work at home and abroad featuring raps born from his experiences living in Australia (such as the above excerpt). While he has a successful alternative career as a theatre actor and director (mostly on shows which blend hip-hop and theatre), he is best known for his community work facilitating workshops in breaking, MCing, beatboxing, and musical production in urban and rural areas across Australia, and is especially renowned for his work in rural and isolated Indigenous communities (Caines; Mitchell, "Morganics").

Wire is a descendant of the Gumbaynggirr nation and grew up in the small rural town of Bowraville, on the north coast of NSW. He draws from his background as a singer-songwriter and articulate community spokesperson to support his late-starting career as a solo hip-hop artist and facilitator on community hip-hop projects. Over the past ten years, he has increasingly linked hip-hop with Indigenous cultural forms. For Wire, hip-hop fits in perfectly with the lineage of Australian Indigenous oral history, storytelling, dance, and spirituality:

It's a 'Modern Day Corroboree' actually. It's still the same corroboree, still singing and dancing and telling the same stories about the immediate environment [. . .] The reason I was attracted to it was the song and dance aspect to it, because the culture I come from, the Dreamtime, we always expressed our stories, our beliefs, our fears, our superstitions through song and dance. So being an Abo-digital in the 21st century, it was a natural evolution for me to move into hip-hop and continue the corroboree [. . .] I'm Abo-digital because I'm a 21st century Aboriginal, I'm down with laptops and mobile phones and home entertainment. But digital also means your hands and your fingers. I'm still putting my fingers in the dirt; I'm still using my hands to create things. (Wire, Mitchell, and Keys)



**Wire MC**

Photo Credit: Will Jarrett

In this interview, conducted by Mitchell as part of an ongoing research project into Australian hip-hop, Wire links history, spirituality, and creativity into one practice, blurring the lines between historical “fact” and lived experience. In Wire’s view, both Aboriginal corroboree and Australian hip-hop share a focus on creating new conversations between the past and present.

## **Improvising Pedagogical Methods**

Psychologist and pedagogue Keith Sawyer and musician/musicologist George Lewis have both emphasized the power of improvisational creativity in their extensive writing on pedagogy in the creative arts. Sawyer has completed extended empirical studies into musical, theatrical, and conversational improvisation (*Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration*; “Improvisation and the Creative Process”) and examined improvisational strategies in classroom and non-classroom based teaching (“Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation”; “Improvisation and Teaching”; “Learning Music from Collaboration”). For Sawyer, improvisational pedagogies offer some of the most effective learning strategies:

[Participants] learn more effectively in collaborative, creative classrooms. Creative and improvisational teaching are effective tools for collaborative and constructivist learning of any content [ . . . ] The teacher leads the classroom in group improvisations, rather than acting as a solo performer in front of the class audience. Students become socialized into classroom communities of practice, in which the whole class collaborates in each student’s learning.” (“Learning Music” 58)

Sawyer has documented a number of features of improvisational pedagogy that are particularly effective in learning situations. These include improvised classroom discussion, improvisational peer collaboration, and the implementation of improvisational structures that provide “scaffolds” for learning (“Creative Teaching”). Sawyer’s historical work also clearly shows that the results of this sort of collaborative learning and thinking can be truly exceptional (*Group Genius*). Other scholars of pedagogy such as Paulo Friere, bell hooks, and Henry Giroux have also highlighted how important it is to engage in ethical, dialogical, and collaborative pedagogical partnerships between teachers and students in the face of widespread educational and social inequality.

George Lewis has documented, analysed, and questioned improvisatory pedagogical processes in music from the perspective of a former student and established improvising musician, and from his experiences as a professor of improvisation theory and practice (“Teaching Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Memoir”). In a number of articles and book chapters, he has examined Afrological and Eurological improvisational pedagogies in the fields of experimental music and jazz in order to examine how dominant and resistant discourses of knowledge circulate in both formal and informal educational contexts (“Improvised Music after 1950”; “Improvisation and Pedagogy”). For Lewis, pedagogical contexts in improvisational creativity should aim to forward artist-led, “multi-methodological,

intercultural musical environments" where ethnocentric ideas of musical value and static codifications of improvised music can be replaced by hybrid blends of experimental composition and improvisation, informed by specific local, cultural, and political conditions and by current arts practices ("Teaching Improvised Music" 107).

Morganics and Wire work with student-centred, culturally relevant teaching processes that offer tools for students to critique and shape their own learning environments. They incorporate elements of improvised discussion, improvised peer collaboration, and improvisational structures and disciplines that Sawyer has shown to be effective in the classroom. This is a "critical hip-hop pedagogy" immersed in the texts, practices, politics, and cultures of hip-hop and in the everyday lives of the students (Hill; Stovall), one that works outside schools and formal learning institutions. I would argue that this work strives to achieve the kind of artist-led, "multi-methodological, intercultural musical environment" envisioned by Lewis, although this idiomatic Australian pedagogical environment obviously constitutes a very different cultural and artistic context from the North American non-idiomatic environments Lewis describes.

The following broad descriptions of Morganics's and Wire's teaching methods are partially based on my observation of, participation in, and documentation of a number of workshops, competitions, tours, and performances by Morganics and Wire that took place between 2001 and 2009 in Sydney, Adelaide, Bellingen, Coffs Harbour, Canberra, and Brisbane and on information from personal interviews and conversations with the artists. I generalize in order to draw a broad picture of their pedagogical approach and then proceed to more concrete examples of work arising from these workshops. I also draw from interviews with the artists in a range of media sources, including *Local Noise: Indigenising Hip-hop in Australasia*, a research project co-ordinated by Tony Mitchell and Alistair Pennycook and supported by the Australian Research Council (<http://www.localnoise.net.au/>).

## 1) Community Collaboration and Multiplicity

Morganics and Wires's workshops usually involve a discussion of the form, politics, and history(s) of hip-hop; a practical demonstration by both artists of improvised performance; listening to tracks or watching videos of work developed by previous workshop participants; sharing dance and music techniques through improvisation games and exercises; and performing or producing tracks, dance performances, and art work. Hip-hop is usually taught as an interdisciplinary form, made up of the connected elements of rapping, breaking, DJing, beatboxing, and graffiti. These classes are lively and interactive—debate and disagreement are promoted, especially about definitions of hip-hop and what constitutes Australian hip-hop. Participants are encouraged to speak about the artists that inspire them, and hip-hop is framed as a fluid, ever-changing international practice based on spontaneity and collaboration. From the outset of any workshop program, "performance" spaces are set aside for freestyle rap and improvised b-boy/b-girl moves. These improvisation sessions usually take place within supportive, less competitive versions of traditional cypher circles where everyone is actively encouraged to take a turn in the centre, or as part of more formal, competitive battles where people pitch their skills against each other for the audience or for set judges to arbitrate.

Raps, beats, and breaks are created on the spot in response to other people's work. The participants learn by doing and by paying close attention to each other's words and music. In workshops and performances, I witnessed raps being improvised about family disintegration, community housing, tiny regional towns, high schools, inner states of mind, dating Pamela Anderson, learning different languages, babies' voices, political tensions, cross-cultural tensions, and the state of the Australian music industry. They were full of pain, joy, frustration, and exhilaration. These raps respond and grow in the process of back and forth rap "battles," call and response sections, and sampling and parody of each other's work. They are built out of the atmosphere of trust, risk and reciprocity, and shared community knowledge fostered carefully by Morganics and Wire. These spaces also encompass contradictory stories from the same area and hold the troubled notion of community—what Petra Kuppers describes as "a tactical lever, utopian hope *and* oppressive regime [. . .] both given *and* longed for, exclusionary *and* inclusive, tradition *and* innovation, located in stories, spaces and habitus"—up for debate. This is a pedagogy immersed in improvisational classroom discussion and collaboration, spontaneous creativity, risk-taking, and active listening.

Morganics and Wire usually focus on break, rap, and beatboxing, although DJs and graffiti artists often join their classes. The participants cycle from tutor to tutor in a workshop, focusing in smaller groups on one element of hip-hop at a time before rejoining the larger group for group cyphers. These classes usually include a mix of beginners and advanced participants who also teach and mentor each other. Participants break or rap and beatbox with the facilitators in a process of imitation, demonstration, competition, and cooperation. Participant and teacher roles become difficult to differentiate as experiences and techniques are shared and facilitators perform alongside the participants.

Workshops are usually offered as part of a larger program directed to a particular community. Morganics and Wire coordinate events, or local arts organisations invite them to participate in existing programs, where they often become

involved in shaping the events. Other workshops cover diverse areas such as video art, theatre, R & B dance and vocals, photography, traditional Indigenous history and culture, personal development and self-esteem, and employment skills. Facilitators usually come from a diverse mix of cultural backgrounds, reflecting the increasingly multicultural nature of Australian hip-hop and the artists' commitment to incorporating multiple styles and voices. Workshop facilitators often attend each other's classes and attempt to synthesize their different approaches. As these facilitators learn about the work of local musicians from their students, they invite them to participate in classes and performances, thus incorporating local events and histories into the improvised classroom discussions. Lesson plans are thus necessarily open and constantly changing based on this multi-methodological, locally inflected collaborative process. Public performance events arising from this process usually incorporate a number of media, showcasing an interdisciplinary, improvisatory pedagogical environment.

Morganics and Wire create an environment where participants are encouraged to express different views and perspectives about their local culture. This polyvocality is particularly evident on the *All You Mob* compilation CD, where live recordings from workshops feature many different improvised solos all expressing different interpretations of local myths and radically different descriptions of specific geographic locations and community groups.

While he works from a radically different artistic and cultural context, percussionist Eddie Prévost suggests that the presentation of multiple voices is a key component to improvised creativity. In reference to the work of the London-based, free-improvising group AMM, he states, "Part of the [. . .] philosophy, its ethos if you like, is the idea of concurrent commentary: separate voices speaking at the same time, interweaving and interleaving. But each voice is not atomized or individuated [. . .] Paradoxically it may be that individuality can only exist and develop in a collective context" (qtd. in Bailey 129). Daniel Fischlin similarly argues, with reference to improvised music collectives, that the concept of the "individual" in group improvised music needs to be placed under critical pressure.

The notion of the individual in such improvisatory circumstances needs radical revision, too—especially as one aspect in a complex overlay of contingencies that contribute to an improvised iteration. Yes, the individual can perform as a solo voice both alone and in ensembles. But what is the origin of that voice? I'd argue that improvisation places considerable pressure, in spite of the overused trope of the "solo" as a mode for conveying distinctive musical content, on reductive notions of the individual. If anything, improvisation shows how contingent any sense of individuality is on group dynamics and contexts that always far exceed the individual.

I argue that Morganics and Wire are involved in creating multi-authored, community-based processes that challenge the notion of a single "artist" or a finalized "product." This work is collaborative, constantly changing, and based on multiple voices. Morganics and Wire have both criticized the way media accounts have ignored the community of participants and artists who made the tracks that arise from the workshops, naming the performers as sole authors and not acknowledging the work of the other participants, artists, and community leaders involved (Personal Interview; Wire, Mitchell, and Keys). These improvising performances display multiple perspectives and voices, producing different visions of history, culture, community, and personal identity.

## 2) Local Specificity

Morganics and Wire encourage participants in their workshops to break away from standard break moves and experiment with changing the rhythm of their raps. The idiomatics of rap and break are set up only as a basis, or what Sawyer might call a "scaffold," for creativity. The facilitators and students incorporate new elements into their breaks, such as local forms of traditional dance, classical or contemporary dance moves, and acrobatics. These creative laboratories expand beatboxing and rapping techniques to include the imitation and incorporation of local traditional instruments, native animals and bird sounds, local rhythms and beats, traditional children's songs and rhymes, theatrical and spoken word segments, and different dialects and slang.

Morganics also expects participants to work from their own culturally-specific experiences: "My biggest agenda to push is that I have to put my foot down and say I'm not going to record that if you sound totally American—you're going to have to change it—I'm sorry I don't want you talking about 'niggers' if you're a Koori [south Eastern Aboriginal]" (qtd. in Glastonbury). This sentiment is echoed in the work of other facilitators in Australia, such as Mexican-Australian rapper and facilitator Maya Jupiter: "When you start out with people reciting 50 Cent lyrics and then at the end they are, you know, rapping about their own experiences, that's a huge feat, that's not easy to do" (qtd. in *Hip-Hop and Contemporary Australia*). Wire suggests that this exploration needs to come from personal experience as well as from dreams for positive realities: "A big part of the self-empowering thing for them is like, well, at least they get to focus on the better times, the positives. These are young rural kids who are still growing up, so they don't want to be talking about the death of ATSIC [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission] or

something. They've got more important things to be singing about, like being young black kids having fun" (qtd. in Lobley).

Morganics describes his process of facilitation as follows:

I'd often play some other tracks from other communities. So this bunch they'd, you know, rap about this, this mob raps about this. You know. You don't have to rap about either of those things, but what I'd like to hear is that: What do you want to rap about? What's happening in your life? What's going on? You know, what do you get in to? What do you like doing? I generally like to keep it reasonably positive [pause] but things will come up, and it's quite [pause] I mean really, that's where the politics are in your life. (Personal Interview)

Pedagogy for both Wire and Morganics is a process of dialogue, collaboration, and personal development. Wire prefers that his workshops be

in the inner city or out remote places, I go to them not to teach skills but to share skills. I believe hip-hop allows us to express these skills that we are born with; everybody can talk, everybody can dance, it's just that hip-hop helps you to define your words and your rhythm. I don't hip-hop to advance hip-hop, I don't MC to advance hip-hop. MC for me means "My Cousin." And that's what it is for me, so when I am doing workshops it's more about letting these people know that we have the capabilities and the right to express ourselves. (Wire, Mitchell, and Keys)

Wire sees hip-hop as a vital tool to break into the cycle of shame that stops Indigenous Australians from playing an active role in how they are represented and remembered: "I go to a lot of Indigenous communities and what I find is the shame factor, and that shame factor that has been holding us back. That's a harness that we've put on ourselves—well, we didn't put it on—but we are happy to walk around with it" (Wire, Mitchell, and Keys).

### **3) Adaptation and negotiation**

Morganics and Wire have conducted hip-hop workshops all over Australia. They have held workshops and performances in high-security jails, living rooms, parks, schools, cafes, community centres, nightclubs, theatres, festival tents, and conference centres. They have to adapt in real-time to the effects of social discrimination and severe economic depression: poorly equipped venues with inferior or non-existent equipment; participants who disappear or are jailed midway through events; participants with untreated mental health conditions, learning disabilities, or drug problems. They also have to be able to work flexibly with local community leaders and organizers, often under severe time constraints or during swiftly changing and dangerous local crises. When I interviewed Morganics, he cited an unnamed workshop he held in a multicultural regional town in NSW. The late-starting workshop was eventually held in an outside car park, as the community centre had been locked due to heightened tensions between local ethnic gangs. In this case, according to Morganics, hip-hop acted as a "survival tool" to calm the situation and get young people from different sides of the conflict collaborating; but he also found that his status as an outsider and his ignorance of local circumstances placed him in great danger (also referred to in "Crouching Bboy Hidden Dreadlocks").

During a workshop in a youth club in the rural town of Coffs Harbour, as part of the 2001 Harbour Youth Services workshop tour, Wire worked for over an hour with one sixteen-year-old female Indigenous participant in order to help her find a way to join a class of aggressive, mostly male peers. By forming small cypher circles inside the larger group and constantly rotating participants in the centre, Wire created an environment of respect and support for others' fears and vulnerabilities that, combined with his personalized, private encouragement away from the group, gave this woman the confidence to stand up and improvise a haunting rap about early mornings with her six-month-old baby and the changing colour of the sky. Improvising rap and break in these conditions generated common ground between genders and between strangers, fostering dialogue, sharing, and respect.

Morganics and Wire's adaptations are often as simple as holding a toy microphone up to a small personal CD player to get playback volume when a proper sound system is outside the workshop's budget (Bellingen in 2003), or buying cheap equipment from local second-hand shops and adapting it to the needs of the workshop (Bellingen and Wilcannia in 2001). Both adjust their break and rap exercises on the spot to address complex gender and cultural concerns and to accommodate participants who do not have the physical strength, reading and writing skills, or confidence to complete them (Adelaide in 2002 and Sydney in 2004 and 2005). Through their actions, both artists continually remind their participants that one can produce hip-hop without expensive resources and adjust it to any

environment. A key part of their pedagogical impact comes from applying improvisatory, adaptive negotiation skills to both artistic and social contexts.

#### 4) Opening Spaces

It could be argued that the process of collaboration and performance utilized by these artists is not unique and just a common feature of the composition and performance process, just as rock and pop groups use a mix of creative processes to develop their material and all live music-making incorporates elements of fluidity, improvisation, and collaboration. Christopher Small, for example, warns against restricting definitions of music to an abstract “thing” produced by professional artists, describing instead an embodied, interactive activity made up of a mix of everyday listeners and musicians, including composers, artists, audiences, producers, dancers and others, all involved in what he calls the activity of “musicking” (9-11). Morganics and Wire certainly collaborate with other “musickers” to create material and lively performance events, but it would be unfortunate to reduce their workshops to mere rehearsals or composition exercises. These workshops act as laboratories where self-expression is mentored and facilitated through a variety of improvisatory activities, thereby giving a voice to some of the most disadvantaged communities in the nation.

Public performance events include pre-rehearsed material combined with sections of freestyle rapping, beatboxing, and improvised break dancing, as well as gaps where audience members are invited to contribute to the show. For example, during a showing of Morganics’s own autobiographical show, “Crouching B-Boy, Hidden Dreadlocks,” in the Sydney Opera House, at a set moment in the show, the house lights were turned on and audience members in the Studio Theatre were encouraged to stand up to rap “off the top of their heads.” Some of these audience raps were obviously prepared, but others were freestyle and responded to the audience around them and to the content in previous raps. During every performance that I witnessed, at least four or five people of different ages and backgrounds accepted this challenge. At other shows, such as the final concerts at the Stamping Ground dance festival in Bellingen (2004-2006), the border between audience and stage was less defined and audiences were invited to join shifting improvised cypher and breaking circles formed for the duration of the performance. This pedagogical process, both in workshops and performances, explicitly opens space for improvised, collaborative expression and the challenging of personal and community histories. These workshops and performances represent precious moments where participants can reclaim a sense of agency.

#### Examples Arising from Workshops by Morganics and Wire

##### The Block

Stand your ground, black people from The Block  
We are not moving on so rack off cops  
With the Redfern Housing Company  
Gonna manifest our own destiny

Junkies from The Block  
If you’ve had a bad shot  
You get your final bed  
Triple 0, call the Ambos [Ambulance]  
He’s not dead  
Junkies better throw their needles away  
Or they’ll never see the light of another day  
Just walk away, just walk away

Doing bag snatching, coppas coming this way  
Running out of puff trying to get rid of the hot stuff  
Dealers, junkies, gamblers all bringing the coppas around  
Making a bad rap for our part of town  
We’ve had about enough  
They better move on  
We’re comin at ya rough from the microphone  
This is where we live, what we call home [. . .]

Standing in the street in the park in the dark

No shoes on with needles around  
The playground  
Pemulwuy Park is the place to play  
It's not just young 'uns I'm here to say  
People running around with needles in their arm  
Falling on the ground doing themselves harm  
The government took my people away and now I'm never ever going to see them again  
It's a pain when I'm waiting in the rain  
A guy asks for a pie  
Not again  
I feel sorry for the poor buggar  
But no one else seems to bother  
He must be a gubba,<sup>3</sup> a gubbariginal  
And here comes the rain, just another day

*Excerpt from "The Block" by Jesse Close and the Clevo St. Boys (Year 8 Cleveland St. High School, Sydney), facilitated and produced by Morganics, 2001.*

The piece was developed as part of a larger performance event entitled *Stand Your Ground*, coordinated in 2001 by the inner-city arts organization PACT Youth Theatre (<http://www.pact.net.au>). Participants in *Stand Your Ground* were drawn from local high schools and community centres in the central and inner-west Sydney areas of Waterloo, Redfern, Erskineville, Alexandria, and Mascot. "The Block" was created by students from Redfern attending Cleveland Street High School. It is an excellent example of the type of work that comes from Morganics's improvisational pedagogy.

Redfern is an inner-city suburb of Sydney that contains a large Indigenous community with a history of social activism.<sup>4</sup> "The Block" is a block of houses located near the Redfern Railway station, an area beset with severe social problems. Issues facing this community include inadequate public housing, crime, widespread drug abuse, violent public clashes with police and government services, and pressure from inner-city developers keen to gain access to this prime real estate.<sup>5</sup> The area also has a predominantly negative image in local and national media, especially since the "Redfern Riots" of 2004, a well-publicized, violent clash between police and community members on The Block. These "riots" occurred following the death of a local teenage boy during a police chase in 2004 ("Redfern Riots: A Seven News Report"). This piece references the central park in The Block, named after Aboriginal resistance fighter Pemulwuy (1750-1802); the community collective in charge of housing, "The Redfern (Aboriginal) Housing Company" (1973-current); and the hundred-year-long government policy of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their parents (approximately 1869-1969), which led to what is now known as the "Stolen Generation" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission).

The *Stand Your Ground* project included workshops in R&B dance, video, writing, break, MCing, and beat boxing. Morganics taught students break and rap, participated in cultural workshops, and was present both onstage and offstage at public performances. At some of the workshops, local community leaders joined with the young participants to produce smaller performances for families, schools, and other participants. There were also cultural workshops where inner-city students were taken to remote rural areas to learn about traditional Indigenous spirituality and culture. The project resulted in a video—a public multimedia performance event made up of different dance, music, film, and storytelling elements—and an audiovisual CD-ROM.

"The Block" was developed through improvisation jams with five teenagers working with artists and community leaders. It was then produced and recorded by Morganics on site. At the main public performance of *Stand Your Ground*, the participants performed "The Block" live with the pre-recorded track playing behind them, and Morganics joined them onstage. They also broke during the beatbox sections of the recording. They were improvising, but drawing on moves they had learned in the workshops. The teenagers also performed in front of a video they made with artist Rebecca Ingram. This video featured the performers on the streets of Redfern, in front of community murals, and at the local boxing gym, next to pictures of local boxing hero Anthony Mundine. They posed in American clothing in front of local Redfern shops, shifting from aggressive poses with angry expressions to laughter and playful antics. They imitated and parodied posturing and gestures from video clips of the gangsta rap they listened to, such as Ice-T, Dr Dre, and 50 Cent.

Despite the negative social realities described in the lyrics of the "The Block," the public performance at *Stand Your Ground* was imbued with palpable energy, enthusiasm and laughter and was almost drowned out by the supportive screaming and shouting from a mostly local audience. The five performers each took a turn and rapped different

visions of their home. They forgot the original lyrics at many points and made up new ones on the spot, at times deliberately changing the rhythm of the piece—“this is where we live,” for instance, became “this is where we belong.” Some lyrics were shouted over and over again, erasing the sound of the recording altogether: for example, “he must be a gubba, a gubboriginal,” “so rack off cops,” and “manifest our own destiny” were all repeated many times, out of sync with the back track. The performers, along with Morganics and local community leaders, challenged each other to produce new dance sequences and beatbox rhythms. Children ran across the stage and were picked up by the performers and held as they sang and danced, interrupting the flow of rapping, and audience interjections and cheers merged with the performance to make a piece of community music and dance that was quite different from the version recorded during the workshop. This was “musicking” at its most flexible—interactive and raucous: the result of a pedagogical process that valued improvisation as a tool for collaboration and transcultural understanding.

Like many pieces developed by Morganics and Wire, “The Block” also unsettles the idea that community hip-hop can somehow be just a vehicle for the transparent “production” of history. It echoes N.W.A’s classic “Fuck the Police,” and is clearly both a description of everyday activities and an articulation of desires and fantasies: to be left alone by the police; for the drug trade in Redfern to disappear; for self-actualized destiny manifested through involvement with strong community organizations; for resistant, celebratory identities as global hip-hop artists. For these fourteen- and fifteen-year-old artists, this rap is thus patently fiction and a dream for the future, as well as a description of a harsh reality. It juxtaposes media images of drugged, socially isolated Redfern youth with the voices of active, socially engaged youth working to improve their community. As an historical record, this piece is embedded in the spaces and communities of Redfern, even as it challenges them. It is a conversation between a Redfern controlled by police discipline and a Redfern embodied every day by these teenage boys, just as it is both a celebration of difference and a strategy for producing it. In a [YouTube video](#) made of the rap, the track plays along with archival footage of Aboriginal activism from the 1920s to the present, including Aboriginal rights marches; the raising of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy opposite the Old Parliament House in Canberra; and Aboriginal run medical, housing, and food programs in Redfern. The clip, made by PACT in collaboration with the performers and the community, ends with footage of a festival in Pemulwuy Park in Redfern featuring Wire and a young Redfern rapper performing in front of a local mural. This video is a visual and aural representation of the role that improvised hip-hop can have in reconstructing Indigenous history and in fostering community driven political resistance in Australia.

### **Down River**

When it’s really hot we go to the river and swim  
When we go fishing we catch some bream  
When the rivers high we jump off the bridge  
When we get home, we play some didg<sup>6</sup>

When it’s really hot we go to the river and swim  
When we go fishing we catch some bream  
When the rivers high we jump off the bridge  
When we get home, we play some didg

They call me Wally this is where I’m at  
I wear on my head a baseball cap  
Parramatta<sup>7</sup> is my team if you know what I mean  
To be the captain, that’s my dream

My name is Keith from Wilcannia Street  
I walk on stilts to a beat the beat  
When I go out  
I shake a leg  
This is my rhyme and that’s what I said

When Colroy’s here, have no fear  
The wild pigs better watch out for my spear  
I’m with the gang and I’m almost ten  
I wanna be an actor like Jackie Chan

Lendell’s my name and I like to do backflips  
Listen to the words that come from Wally

Jump off the bridge and I play some didg  
When I catch a fish, I put it in the fridge

My name is Buddy and I can't stand still  
Wilcannia to Dubbo to Broken Hill  
I've been moved around  
From town to town  
And this is how  
I get down

*Excerpt from "Down River," by The Wilcannia Mob/ Barkandji Boys, facilitated and produced by hip-hop artists Morganics and Wire, 2001*

"Down River" was made as part of a hip-hop workshop tour sponsored by the Shopfront Theatre on the outskirts of Sydney. Morganics and Wire were employed by Shopfront to teach breaks, beat-boxing, and MCing and to produce performances with youth in isolated areas. Morganics describes the recording of "Down River" on *All You Mob* as a raw product of the fluid, improvised workshop processes that took place in community centres and homes throughout the area: "It's not some slick radio track, it's very low-fi [. . .] We recorded it in a lounge room in a couple of hours one afternoon with an old microphone I picked up in an op shop [secondhand shop] and a Minidisc and a looping pedal. I suppose that's the beauty of it. People like the rawness of it" (qtd. in Munro 14). This piece is an example of new, polyvocal histories of Australian cultural experience produced by improvisatory pedagogical practices.

This song was produced in the tiny, remote, and economically disadvantaged rural town of Wilcannia, almost 1000 km northwest of Sydney and 195km east of Broken Hill. Its population is just seven hundred and fifty and its climate is hot and dry. The Wilcannia Mob (now known as the Barkandji Boys) includes Walter James Ebsworth (Wally), Buddy Stewart Blair, Lendal Isaac King, Colin Roy Johnson (Colroy), and Keith John Dutton (Keithy). The performers were between nine and thirteen years of age at the time the workshops took place. The piece went on to considerable fame, receiving repeated airplay on national radio and TV, spawning a number of performances at music and cultural events, winning national prizes, and getting sampled by internationally renowned artists such as M.I.A and Diplo.

"Down River" has been performed in a number of different contexts. The young boys are typically accompanied by an improvising didgeridoo player, initially local Wilcannia player Watu, and later other didgeridoo artists such as well-known Gamilaroi artist Stingray.<sup>8</sup> They are also accompanied by live, improvised beatboxing by Morganics and Wire, or by pre-recorded samples, and at times the performance includes other artists breaking as they rap. During a 2004 performance as part of a show called *River, Rhythm Beatbox* at the Sydney Opera House, there were also new video segments projected behind the performance showing time-delayed photography of the Darling River and footage of the boys in Wilcannia shops and on local streets. The performers are usually supported by a team of artists and facilitators who encourage and support them onstage. Performances often include open freestyle sections with the artists or the audience. Each performance thus reflects the interdisciplinary, fluid, collaborative improvisational pedagogy of the initial workshop process.

A distinct Wilcannia accent and vocabulary is evident in the many performances and on the recording of "Down River," as is the evocation of the remembered site and place—the Darling River—where the boys used to play. "Down River", like "The Block," opens up history as something that is both dreamed and lived and makes spaces for multiple, simultaneous historical narratives. In 2001, for instance, the Darling River was in severe drought and at times completely dry. There was not necessarily any "river" in Wilcannia when the majority of the performances of this track occurred. The river is, however, a central spiritual element in the culture of the local Barkandji (river) people. Memory and desire (swimming and fishing freely in this sacred river), imagination and creativity (dreams of being a football quarterback or a movie star), and lived practice (spearing wild pigs, doing back flips, swimming, traveling) all combine together. These five young performers improvised different Wilcannian spaces where "anything is possible." This vision collides with a reality of uneven grids of regional funding and government resource allocation where children are "moved around" by the foster care system or by transient families. This song offers an alternate social "history" of Wilcannia, a positive vision that casts into high relief other historical realities such as low life expectancy (just thirty-three years for adult males in Wilcannia), high youth suicide rates, lack of educational and medical resources, and extreme poverty (Calma).

Profits from the sale and playback of "Down River," along with fees for their appearances on TV and at concerts, have been collected in a trust fund by Shopfront Theatre for the Barkandji Boys. According to Melinda Collie-Holmes,

“this track was the first bit of positive publicity the community had had in a long time. One of the Elders said at the time: ‘These boys are saving our town’” (“Story Snapshot”). Her book and website document a remarkable story and highlight the impact the Barkandji Boys have had on their community, in particular their success in bringing publicity and associated funding into the community, resulting in the recent opening of a recording studio and the construction of the town’s first youth centre (which attracts over 70 visitors daily). In many ways, this improvised collaborative community performance of Wilcannian social history continues to shape the future of these young men and their community. Given the statistics in the latest government report on Indigenous affairs, these successful, small, improvisational partnerships with Indigenous youth become vital tactics in the fight to expose and alleviate the appalling, ongoing discrepancies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s access to health care, social services, housing, education, and employment (Rudd).

## Conclusion: Archiving Improvisations

We wanted to meet as many kids around Australia as possible and collect their stories. Telling the stories of Australians is what the National Museum of Australia is responsible for and that includes the stories of young people, not just famous people, celebrities or explorers. The Museum also wants to use creative ways to collect stories. Hip-hop was perfect for this. In its simplest form, hip-hop is spoken word set to a beat, which allows for the telling of rich stories, opinions and perspectives. (*Many Rhymes, One Rhythm*)

Through the *Many Rhymes, One Rhythm* project, Morganics and Wire conducted hip-hop workshops in seven towns across Australia: Weipa, Queensland; Katherine, Northern Territory; Derby, Western Australia; Geraldton, Western Australia; Port Augusta, South Australia; Swan Hill, Victoria; and Moree, New South Wales. They worked with over sixteen hundred youths from very different cultural backgrounds. Each workshop lasted just forty-five minutes. Video artist Finton Mahony documented the workshops while Morganics and Wire produced compilation tracks using lyrics and recordings contributed by each area’s participants. The result was a CD, DVD, and online exhibition funded and hosted by the National Museum of Australia.

One of the stated aims of the *Many Rhymes, One Rhythm* tour was to archive the stories of young Australians for eventual placement into Australia’s “growing oral history collection” (Coleman). On the surface, this sounds like a fascinating proposal: improvised music as national historical archive. Sadly, none of the hip-hop tracks have so far made it into any large oral history archives outside of the individual project records. The DVD and CD made from the tour are, however, available in a limited number of local public libraries in Australia and through the Museum’s own research library.<sup>9</sup> The online exhibition is also still accessible on the Museum’s website: ([http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/community/many\\_rhymes\\_one\\_rhythm/](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/community/many_rhymes_one_rhythm/)).

This project does, however, bring up the problem of how to reproduce improvised pedagogical work. Even if these recordings had been sent to a larger government-run archive, such as the Oral History Collection at the National Library of Australia, they would still represent only a fraction of the community collaboration that took place through this project. How could these tracks show how the music continued to change as it was performed and re-performed in different venues? How could they properly represent those breakthroughs, those reclamations of personal, creative, and historical voice that occurred in the workshops? Yet without recordings, how can we preserve and study the fleeting art of improvised hip-hop? This remains a complex area of inquiry in improvisation studies, as scholars both celebrate and bemoan the transience of improvised performance (see Coulthard).

Diana Taylor, in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, discusses how performance constitutes a repertoire of knowing distinct from the traditional text-based archive: “By taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by knowledge” (16). She reminds us that all knowledge is continually being produced and reproduced and that performance admits this transience, interaction, and creativity while requiring that “people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge” by “being there, being part of the transmission” (20). Overall, she emphasizes that in performance the gathering of knowledge is in a constant state of flux dependent on interactivity and transmission:

As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions in the repertoire do not remain the same [. . .] Multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record and transmit knowledge. (19, 21)

From this perspective, Morganics and Wire are facilitating a repertoire of live “performances” that are themselves a type of history. The pieces improvised in their workshops do not need to be archived to constitute historical texts. Instead, in each moment of performance, the changing, transient nature of community-created rap honestly represents the way history is constructed and challenged through dialogue. Such music, according to Taylor, by its nature invites audiences and performers to come together and create work of lasting artistic and social significance. Morganics, Wire, and the participants in their hip-hop workshops are constantly finding new ways to accept the valuable “gift of time” that improvised performance offers, to create live, unscripted moments in which new voices are heard and new histories are performed into being.



**Morganics at workshops at the Mt Liebig Aboriginal Community**

Photo Credit: Morgan Lewis

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All lyrics transcribed by the author.

<sup>2</sup> “Indigenous” is commonly used in Australia to refer to the nationality of both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island native residents, and so is capitalized.

<sup>3</sup> A derogatory term for a white person.

<sup>4</sup> See The Aboriginal Housing Company: <http://www.ahc.org.au/>

<sup>5</sup> These developers have so far been thwarted by long-standing Indigenous land rights claims. See Correy and the *Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern/Waterloo*.

<sup>6</sup> Digeridoo.

<sup>7</sup> Rugby league team.

<sup>8</sup> The Gamilaroi are an Indigenous Australian people from the area between Tamworth and Goondiwindi, and west to Narrabri, Walgett and Lightning Ridge, in northern New South Wales.

<sup>9</sup> The Museum also gave copies of the CD and DVD to everyone who participated in the workshops.

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