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Versioning for the love of it: Hip-Hop Culture in Aotearoa

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of**

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Lorena GIBSON

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the meaning of Hip-Hop for members of the Aotearoa Hip-Hop community. Based on participant-observation and interviews with members of the Hip-Hop community conducted during 2001-2003, this thesis provides an ethnographic study into what I have identified as the twelve key characteristics of Aotearoa Hip-Hop (authenticity, community, education, empowerment, history, knowledge, originality, representation, resistance, respect, skill and style). The thesis focuses on how these attributes are embodied in performance and in ongoing dialogues within the Hip-Hop community, as well as in the ways in which gender is negotiated in Aotearoa Hip-Hop, revealing the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of Hip-Hop culture in Aotearoa. It also considers the influence of the concept of whakapapa on Aotearoa Hip-Hop's distinctive historical trope, showing how ongoing dialogues within the Hip-Hop community occur at events and online, enacting Hip-Hop communities at these imagined and virtual sites.

*For my parents
Adam and Diane Gibson
and
for the Aotearoa Hip-Hop Community*

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Glossary

The following is a selection of key terms used throughout this thesis. These working definitions were compiled by consulting a variety of books, theses, websites, and from conversations with members of the Hip-Hop community.

Aotearoa – the indigenous Māori term for New Zealand.

B-boy/B-girl – Break-boy/Break-girl. Originally, someone who danced to breakbeats.

Battle – a competition of skill between DJs, MCs or B-Boys/B-girls.

beatboxing – the act of creating rhythmic sounds with various parts of the body, particularly the mouth, throat and hands.

beat juggling – taking two of the same records (or two different records) and manipulating the beat on turntables to create a new one.

bite – to appropriate or steal.

bomb – to write a large piece of graffiti over an extended period or in a concentrated area.

boogaloo – flexing of the muscles to the beat while dancing, similar to popping. A fluid funkstyle dance first done by Boogaloo Sam of The Electric Boogaloos in the early 1970s.

breaker – B-boy/B-girl. When B-boys dance they are said to be ‘breaking’. Breaking typically involves athletic power moves and displays of agility, strength and skill.

breakbeat – in Hip-Hop’s early years, DJs would play the break beat (drumming or instrumental) section of a song over and over, to which B-boys would dance.

breakdance – an incorrect term for breaking coined by the media.

burners – superlative graffiti pieces.

crew – a collective. Similar to a posse, but not the same as a gang.

cultural texts – any textual product of culture, including videos, CDs, vinyl, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, documentaries, academic publications, and so on. Often products of mass media.

culture as text – a Geertzian notion meaning to analyse or ‘read’ cultural forms as one would a literary text.

diss – disrespect. To ‘diss’ someone is to insult or disrespect them.

DJ – from Disc Jockey, a DJ does more than ‘push play’ on turntables; s/he creatively manipulates records and cross-faders to interpret and create musical material. Sometimes a DJ will create his/her own beats using the latest in recording technology.

ethnoscape – a term coined by Arjun Appadurai meaning “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (Appadurai, 1996:33).

- freestyle** – improvised rhyme. Can also be applied to dance or graffiti.
- fresh** – styley, up-to-date, good.
- funkstyles** – the name for certain styles of dance, including popping, locking and boogaloo. Not the same as B-boying, although Hip-Hop dance has appropriated and adapted funkstyle forms.
- glocalization** – “A term popularized by Robertson (1992:173-4) to describe how global pressures and demands are made to conform to local conditions. Whereas powerful companies might ‘customize’ their product to local markets, glocalization operates in the opposite direction. Local actors select and modify elements from an array of global possibilities, thereby initiating some democratic and creative engagement between the local and the global” (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000:377).
- graffiti artist** – someone who creates works of art in the medium of graffiti.
- Hip-Hop** – a term encompassing all the elements associated with Hip-Hop (MCing, DJing, graffiti and dance) which originated in 1970s New York City. Hip-Hop is generally referred to as a culture, a shared consciousness of the elements and characteristics the comprise Hip-Hop.
- ideoscape** – according to Arjun Appadurai, ideoscapes are “concatenations of images ... (that) are often directly political and frequently have lots to do with the ideologies of states and the counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it” (Appadurai, 1996:36). Ideoscapes are composed of “a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including *freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation*, and the master term *democracy*” (ibid, 36).
- legal** – a commissioned piece of graffiti art (as opposed to ‘non-permission’, or illegal, pieces).
- locking** – a dance created in 1970 by Don Campbell that comes under the umbrella of funkstyles but that has also been embraced and adapted by Hip-Hop.
- MC** – from Master of Ceremonies or Mic Controller. MC generally refers to a lyricist providing verbal raps over music.
- mediascape** - “*Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai, 1996:35).
- old school** – a style of music or dance associated with the 1980s (and sometimes the early 1990s).
- piece** – short for masterpiece, a large and complex work of graffiti.
- popping** – a style of dance similar to boogaloo with origins in Southern California in the 1970s. Also comes under the umbrella of funkstyles.
- power moves** – athletic moves in breaking inspired by gymnastics and martial arts. Often involve displays of strength and dexterity.
- rap** – spoken lyrics or rhymes over beats. Rap is just one of the elements of the wider Hip-Hop culture, and is not the same as Hip-Hop. Different styles of rap include gangsta, party, conscious, old school, and so on (c.f. Zemke-White, 2000:75-76).

scratch – a turntablism move whereby the record is manipulated back and forth under the needle, producing a scratching sound.

sick – excessively good.

tag – in graffiti, the artist's signature. Usually a pseudonym.

throw-up – a quickly executed small piece of graffiti.

toprock – a simple dance usually done to initiate a breaking routine.

turntablist – a term used to describe a DJ with a high level of skill in manipulating records on turntables.

uprock – a move usually done with an opponent in battle; can be confrontational and is quite different to toprocking.

version – a remix of a piece of music. Another's interpretation or rendering of a song or piece of music.

whakapapa – genealogy.