

CAN WE LIVE AND BE MODERN AND INDIGENOUS?

Toward an Indigenous Hip Hop Culture

In the summer of 2009, I attended an academic conference on the West Coast. It was arid and hot. Held during the evening, we had a fancy gathering with fresh-grilled steak, fish, and all sorts of fancy foods that at the time I was not culturally equipped to know what they were. Not knowing very many people, I got my plate, then scoped out where I was going to sit. I approached a table with what looked like a healthy mix of elders and adults in their early thirties, then sat down. An elder took an interest in me. He was a very tall, handsome, masculine Native (Dine) man. He had long gray hair that glistened in the setting sun; he wore a bolo tie. His hands were adorned with at least three rings on each. And he had a deep voice; he sounded like my uncle.

He asked me where I was from (basically, are you Native and if so, where is your family from? I found this a positive approach to the question.). And finally, he asked me what I was interested in academically. I told him that I was interested in the relationship between black Americans and Native Americans during the black-red-power movements. He nodded, searching, I suppose, about how he could follow up with another question or extend the discussion. Sensing the pause, I then casually mentioned that I am interested in Native American hip hop. His head jerked up as if he had a sudden neck spasm. His eyes, now fixed on me, were draped with the wrinkles of knowledge and wisdom.

The elder paused. He rubbed his chin, slightly rocking, seeking a way to respond to my comment. Excited, I leaned in. Finally coming to a response, he said, “You know, there’s a lot of gang activity on the reservation.” Shocked, I paused, waiting for more commentary. He said

nothing further about hip hop. We talked about something else, something that I have suppressed.

My mind was racing. How did we go from talking about hip hop to the problem of gang activity on the reservation? Gang activity and hip hop, at least for me, is a non sequitur. I just could not get over that.

Having reflected on that moment over the last several years, I have come to this conclusion: the elder, bless his heart, equated hip hop, or blackness, with increased gang activity on the reservation. (I never did get a chance to ask for evidence of this; I guess I just chose not to disrespect my elders.) The “urban” is supposedly where premodern Native people go, lose their “traditions,” and bring back the negative aspects of cities to the rez, which impacts social relations. Unfortunately, this urban-rez dichotomy continues in scholarship.¹ Indeed, Hilary Weaver, a scholar in social work, writes, “An urban context can have a negative influence on Native American youth. Deviant peer norms and a ‘city lifestyle’ can promote high risk behaviors and can be incompatible with the cultural immersion found on reservations.”²

There are several problems with this statement. First, Weaver assumes that Native people and cities are incompatible. In going through the author’s footnotes, she cites scholarship that argues that Native people are essentially immigrants to cities, mostly prompted by termination and relocation policies in the postwar era.³ These policies included the Relocation Act of 1956, and were designed to end the so-called Native dependency on the US government for resources, even though it was their treaty obligation. Couched in the language of assimilating into the American dream, Native nations quickly realized that these policies were designed to assimilate Native people into the American way of life, or, to put it more bluntly, make them white and erase their Indigenous heritage. Today, some Native and non-Native folks have come to view urban Native people as not being “real” Indigenous people because they grew up primarily in urban cultural and spatial contexts.

Weaver’s perspective suggests that Native people are recent migrants to cities, similar to white ethnics of earlier periods. Yet, recent historical scholarship has begun to challenge such a deficit perspective, offering

counter narratives that put Native people squarely in the realm of modernity and city development.⁴

Second, the author's comments suggest that the urban code for black and Latinx produces negative consequences for Native people, who are supposed to be pristine, innocent, stoic people who do not live in the modern world. In case the author did not know, most Native people live in cities throughout Canada and the United States.⁵ The author perpetuates the idea that the urban environment is bad because it is poor and inhabited by black and brown folks; history reveals to us that many urban places were deliberately constructed this way.⁶ I am not suggesting that cities are a bastion for peace and prosperity. However, not all is bad in cities, and much cultural exchange takes place within those spaces. Many Native people thrive in cities, and it allows them to expand their cultural repertoire. One of the most important things about the urban culture that has influenced Indigenous people has been hip hop culture.

In this book, I make one major claim: Indigenous hip hop might be one of the most important cultural forces that has hit Indigenous North America since the Ghost Dance movement in the late nineteenth century.⁷ Straight up! Hip hop allows for Indigenous people, through culture, to express themselves as modern subjects. They can use it to move beyond the persistent narratives of their demise, or their invisibility, or the notion that they are people of the past incapable of engaging with modernity.

Now, let the story begin.

Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes analyzes how Native hip hop artists challenge colonialism/racism, and at times, how they are complicit in perpetuating settler ideas of what it means to be Indigenous, construct identity, and present themselves as modern subjects. Placing Indigenous hip hop within the ongoing struggle of oppressed people in North America, especially black Americans who have used hip hop to challenge their own subjugation, this book argues that Indigenous hip hop is the latest and newest assertion of Indigenous sovereignty throughout Indigenous North America. Indigenous hip hop is here to stay, and it is something that we need to discuss and respect.

Based upon interviews with Native hip hop artists, analyses of music and videos, and other media sources, this book argues that hip hop is not only an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, but also a post-modern Indigenous popular culture that is not bound by mainstream and conservative ideas about what it means to be Indigenous. Instead, it illustrates how Native hip hop artists are constructing a variety of identities that serve as a model for how Native communities might reject the “colonial politics of recognition.”⁸ Before continuing, I want to define Indigenous hip hop.

Writers of hip hop have consistently argued that hip hop culture consists of four elements: graffiti, break dancing (b-boy and b-girl), emceeing, and deejaying. Within the last fifteen years, hip hop studies scholars have expanded the elements to include various forms of media like Internet and other forms of expression such as magazines and blogs. Activism has been a major part of hip hop from the beginning, either in the form of protest music or community activism.

Indigenous hip hop includes all of the above, but is uniquely engaged with Native cultures and realities. I define Indigenous hip hop as the culture adopted and produced by Native people who are using this culture to challenge settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy, among other things. I want to reiterate that one of the failures of much of the scholarship in hip hop studies is a focus on the “positive” things that hip hop artists do. Admittedly, I do that in some ways, too. There are artists who are not much interested in challenging heteropatriarchy or imagining alternative forms of gender identities; they ain’ even trying. However, there are those working to create an alternative future for Native people, through hip hop, and my goal is to highlight some of the happenings in Indigenous hip hop at this moment. The two major goals of Indigenous hip hop artists are obtaining Native sovereignty and asserting themselves as modern Native people, which is a key and unique feature of Indigenous hip hop. Other groups use hip hop to assert their humanity; Indigenous people have to convince others that they exist.

While other groups do have to deal with stereotypes, in a settler society that is predicated on Indigenous dispossession, white men have

systematically created the idea for society at large that Native people have disappeared, which is something that other groups do not have to deal with. Given this context, having to assert a Native identity through hip hop is a remarkable task, and while it is difficult to quantify whether or not Native people have been successful in this endeavor (as far as reaching a mainstream white and black American audience), they do have a good social media following, which is important to their brand.

Hip Hop Studies: A State of the Field and Why It Needs Indigeneity

Over the last thirty years, hip hop studies scholarship has exploded. While there was hip hop scholarship in the 1980s, the field of hip hop studies really began with the work of Tricia Rose, whose *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) introduced a new method for studying hip hop. Using black cultural theories, Rose analyzed lyrics, videos, interviews, and followed the media coverage of hip hop in a variety of presses. These methodological approaches helped her to understand and explain a movement that had taken the world by storm. Ever the intellectual prophetess, it was Rose's desire that hip hop would "foster the development of more globally focused projects."⁹ Her words proved prophetic. Since then, the scholarship has gone global. Scholars such as Ian Condry have identified the intersection of blackness and Japanese identity through hip hop culture and other places around the globe.¹⁰ Others such as H. Samy Alim have worked to understand youth culture, hip hop, and language's role in it.¹¹ Hip hop's global turn inspired hip hop journalist Jeff Chang to proclaim, "It's a Hip Hop world."¹²

Hip hop studies is now a serious academic field of critical inquiry. Hip hop has become a part of the elite institutions of the world. There is even a Hip Hop Archive at Harvard University. Hip hop journalist Jeff Chang teaches at Stanford University. Rice University even invited rapper Bun B to teach a course.¹³ Hip hop has and will continue to be an academic pursuit. However, even with all of these great changes and hip hop's global reach, there is little scholarship on Indigenous hip hop.¹⁴ Very few scholars have even broached the topic of indigeneity in hip hop

culture. Those who have analyzed indigeneity have mostly written on hip hop culture in Australia and New Zealand. Many studies in North America have remained in the vaults of libraries as dissertations and theses.¹⁵ Consequently, there is a need for a book that critically explores not only indigeneity within hip hop culture, but also how Indigenous people construct themselves as Indigenous *and* modern subjects, and how they contribute to the sovereignty through hip hop of Indigenous communities.

Hip hop scholars have a major role to play in continuing to develop the field and bridging both the cultural producers and the intellectuals. As hip hop studies and youth culture scholar S. Craig Watkins writes, “In its effort to realize its unique role in the struggle for hip hop, the intelligentsia must help pose the tough questions and offer the critical, though not always favorable, insight that captures the passion, predilections, and perils that define the movement.”¹⁶ It is in this light that I see my role, and I hope other scholars of Indigenous hip hop also begin doing the same thing: documenting the good, the bad, and the not-so-pretty aspects of Indigenous hip hop. We have a responsibility to document and explain Indigenous hip hop to multiple audiences, moving it from the margins of invisibility (much like what we already have to do anyway) to visibility. Above all, our role in producing scholarship on Indigenous hip hop will help further the cause of Indigenous sovereignty. If we can do nothing else, we can at least do that. And that will require that we write honestly and genuinely about what we see and hear, because sovereignty is nothing without honest conversations.

Indigenous Hip Hop: History of Black-Indigenous Cultural Exchange

The history of hip hop and its explosion into the mainstream is the quintessential version of the American dream. Blacks and Puerto Ricans founded it out of nothing. It originated in the devastated community of the South Bronx in New York City with burning buildings, decreased funding for schools, and no money. Yet with the infusion of black American, Caribbean, and Latinx cultural influences, these youths created an entire sound, dance, culture—an entire movement. Little did

they know it would take the world by storm. Today, hip hop is all around the world.¹⁷ Today, hip hop is global.

To date, there is no definitive history of Indigenous hip hop culture in North America. However, in the last few years, scholars have begun to make mention of Indigenous hip hop in their work. For instance, in his book *Heartbeat, Warble, and the Electric Powwow: American Indian Music* (2016), Craig Harris writes about Native American music; he also includes a chapter titled “Divas, Hip-Hoppers, and Electronic Dance Masters,” which includes short references to Cherokee rapper Litefoot, an Ottawa-based group called a Tribe Called Red known for their “Electric Powwow sound,” and Lakota rapper Frank Waln.¹⁸ While important, the author presents only a brief snapshot into their role as hip hop artists. In addition to Harris’s text, *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop* (2016), edited by Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee, provides a collection of essays that illustrate the contribution of Native people’s music to US musical traditions. Framing it in terms of Indigenous “pop,” they challenge the very notion of “tradition.” They write, “by joining ‘pop’ with ‘Indigenous,’ we are also applying pressure to some notions about traditionalism and Indigenous cultures by foregrounding that tradition is not a static category, but one that is contested and evolving.”¹⁹ While the book is far-reaching, covering Indigenous people’s contributions to music, from country to jazz to rock, there are two essays on hip hop, and only one that deals explicitly with Indigenous hip hop.²⁰ In other parts of the Indigenous world, though, scholars have begun to document Indigenous hip hop as a single subject of intellectual inquiry.

Tony Mitchell has written at least one essay that examines the history of Aboriginal hip hop in Australia. He notes, “The history of hip hop in Australia is largely a question of often competing oral histories of local developments in various places.”²¹ Arguably, the same thing could be said about Indigenous hip hop. Journalist Cristina Verán has written on Indigenous hip hop since at least 2006, though namely in Australia and New Zealand. She did write a piece in *SNAG* magazine on reservation hip hop. In a 2006 interview with Jeff Chang, she stated, “I find it very exciting and encouraging that indigenous youth here and

abroad—particularly those who have remained connected to their cultural identities—have actually found in hip-hop a useful tool to remain strong in their cultures.”²² Journalists have written short pieces here and there on Indigenous hip hop—and many more exist today—but we still need book-length work on the history of Indigenous hip hop, capturing its ebbs and flows in Native American country, both on the reserve/ation and in urban spaces. It is not the aim of this section to offer a definitive history of Indigenous hip hop, although someone should write that history, as it is important to acknowledge the longer history of black-Indigenous relations.

Carter G. Woodson, the “father of black history,” wrote in 1920, “One of the longest unwritten chapters of the history of the United States is that treating of the relations of the Negroes and Indians.”²³ In some ways, his words prove prophetic. More recently, scholars such as Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland have written that Afro-Indigenous histories, especially those that fit culturally in between, if you will, share some common historical themes. In a recent coauthored essay, Miles and Holland write,

Pain and loss. Slavery and land. These terms map onto and move through one another a perhaps the primary concepts in Afro-/Native studies. Without a fertile land-base and free labor to work it, the U.S. would not have developed into the prosperous empire that it became. Land was usurped from Indigenous Americans, labor extracted from people of African as well as native descent.²⁴

Black-Indigenous histories have been crossing paths with each other ever since whites began inhumanely bringing captured Africans to Turtle Island. The extent of these relationships in the cultural realm can be difficult to trace, but that should not stop us from at least speculating. As cultural theorist Paul Gilroy writes,

the reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the “Indians” they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from each other.²⁵

Written as a corrective more recently, scholar Jace Weaver argues that we should consider a “Red Atlantic” as a part of the Indigenous experience in the Western Hemisphere. Weaver argues that there are three components of the Red Atlantic, which include the flow of Native bodies and ideas, the movement of material goods, including animals and plants, and the movement of technology and literature. He asserts that the point of his own work is to contend that Native people were not marginal to the Atlantic experience, and also, I argue as I think he would, modernity; but rather, they were “as central as Africans” and Europeans in the development of the Atlantic world.²⁶ The same should be argued about the exchange of music.

Historian John W. Troutman has documented the Indigenous Hawaiian influence on black American music, especially when it comes to the steel guitar.²⁷ As Troutman indicates, cultural exchange, through music, is rarely a one-way transaction. Thus, we can and should at least speculate about the various ways in which black music influenced Indigenous music, and how Indigenous music influenced black music. My aim here, then, is to bring these processes to light, through hip hop culture.

Blackness and indigeneity intersect in Indigenous hip hop in unique ways. For the purposes of this book, I define blackness as a global, cultural phenomenon that demarcates people of African descent from other peoples. Their histories, rooted in Diaspora, especially within the Western Hemisphere are defined by trauma and movement, but also resistance and developing a sense of place. Blackness is at once global and local; it is, above all, a form of resistance to European domination. But blackness must be understood in context, within what the late historian Manning Marable called the “New Racial Domain.” The NRD consists of three social, political, and economic conditions, which impact how we define the experience of black folks today: “mass unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disenfranchisement.”²⁸ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Du Bois defined race relations as the “problem of the color line.”²⁹ Extending this argument, Marable suggested that the problem of the twenty-first century is “the problem of global apartheid: the racialized division and stratification of resources, wealth, and power that separates Europe, North America, and Japan from the billions of mostly black,

brown, indigenous undocumented immigrant, and poor people across the planet.”³⁰ Importantly, blackness is also an expression of culture.

Black cultural theorist Mark Anthony Neal offers a unique perspective on black culture in the postwar period. Referring to what he describes as the “post-soul aesthetic,” Neal writes,

I am surmising that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation, the corporate annexation of black popular expression, cybernization in the workforce, the globalization of finance and communication, the general commodification of black life and culture, and the proliferation of black “meta-identities,” while continuously collapsing on modern concepts of blackness and reanimating “premodern” (African?) concepts of blackness.³¹

Blackness, then, must be understood within all of these contexts. Blackness can be a unifying cultural, ideological, even political force. We should not forget that hip hop culture is an expression of blackness, mixed with some Latinx influences. Indigeneity is also important to hip hop, as I shall show throughout this book.

While Indigenous people are often defined by their historical relationship to a certain place and their engagement with a settler nation, I define indigeneity as a way of being Indigenous in the world, combined with other social identities, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, and status and non-status. In other words, there are multiple ways of being Indigenous and belonging to an Indigenous community. The 2007 United Nations’ Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples was a major step in affirming their right to self-determination.³² Within Indigenous studies, there is no one consensus on what indigeneity means, but I do rely on one put forth by Hawaiian scholar Maile Arvin. She writes, “in my own working definition, [indigeneity] refers to the historical and contemporary effects of colonial and anticolonial demands and desires related to a certain land or territory and the various displacements on that place’s original or longtime inhabitants.”³³ I would add to Arvin’s definition that indigeneity also includes cultural representation, both colonial representations and Indigenous expressions of indigeneity for the purposes of cultural sovereignty.

Forms of indigeneity have always been a part of black cultural production, especially music. As Joy Harjo has stated, “go ahead/ jump holy/ all the way to the stomp grounds/we were there when Jazz was invented.”³⁴ While she acknowledges that jazz was a black cultural product, it also has Indigenous roots. If we can say this about jazz, why can’t we also say the same thing about hip hop? From its conception, drums (and beats) have been a significant part of hip hop music. Both African and Indigenous descendants continue to use the drum as a part of their musical production. Blackness and indigeneity, through sound, have intersected.

Aesthetics of indigeneity have also been a part of hip hop. Let us recall the Soul Sonic Force, led by Afrika Bambaataa. Within the group was a person named Pow Wow, who wore a headdress as well as other articles of what seem to be “indigenous”-inspired clothing. Though some might quip and simply excuse his actions, the fact is that he wore a headdress, and that is not cool, back then or today. Nevertheless, forms of indigeneity have been a part of hip hop culture. Blackness and indigeneity also intersect at the level of discourse, or language.

Language is central to how people view the world. Words are embedded with symbols and meanings.³⁵ Blackness, especially black language, is a part of Indigenous hip hop. As Tricia Rose explains, “Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America.”³⁶ Furthermore, it is “a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music.”³⁷ The key to understanding the rhythms of rap music is also to understand its origins in black culture through language. Rapping is an expression, first and foremost, of black language, only magnified.

According to critical sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman, African American language is “Euro American speech with an Afro-American tone, nuance, and gesture.”³⁸ There are several debates about whether or not African American language is, in fact, a different language or simply a dialect.³⁹ Still, no one can deny its impact in the United States and around the globe, especially as hip hop has helped take it mainstream. One of the most important aspects of it is language. Smitherman also writes, “rap music is rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin, the dozens/playin the dozens,

Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices.”⁴⁰ Language is central to how blackness is performed in hip hop culture; Native people adopt these parts of hip hop culture. Indeed, Native people rapping presents two forms of sociolinguistic construction of reality. It is what Anishinaabe literary scholar Scott Richard Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty: “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse.”⁴¹ Today’s rappers, as modern Indigenous orators, are engaging in two forms of language production for the purposes of Indigenous sovereignty.⁴²

Black and Indigenous relations are not all good. Indeed, within a settler colonial society, Native peoples’ experiences are oftentimes ignored and, even worse, rendered invisible. While blackness represents racialization, we need to also focus on how indigeneity is a result of settler colonialism. Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd presents an important argument for understanding these complicated intersections, “Of course, colonization relies upon racialization to facilitate, justify, and rationalize the state.” But she cautions us that, “to reframe colonization as racialization at the site of radical critique risks leaving those very colonial structures intact on the one hand and allowing all experiences of oppression within settler colonialism to step forward as colonized on the other.”⁴³ In other words, while I seek to understand these cultural intersections, I write about them cautiously, with hopes of a better future for black-Indigenous relations.

Indigenous Hip Hop and Modernity

Indigenous cultures are an important part of decolonizing ourselves in a settler colonial society. By highlighting culture, I am not excluding the material reality of the everyday needs of Indigenous communities, including land, water, food, education, housing, etc. Decolonization is a process whereby we work to cleanse ourselves of the ubiquitous nature of colonialism. That cleansing must happen daily, and it takes many forms. This means that our decolonizing efforts engage with modernity.

Although the idea of modernity is a complicated one, I mean it in its simplest form: how whites have used ideas and representations of

Indigenous people to construct their selves.⁴⁴ In this sense then, being modern is associated with being white and literally living in modern times. Being Indigenous means being nonwhite, in this case Indigenous, and lacking the ability to live in a world that has passed them by—at least that is how the narrative goes. Modernity is negatively used and mobilized not only by whites but also Indigenous people, through the rhetoric of “tradition.” In contrast, I look to reclaim and regenerate the concept of Indigenous modernity to explain, in part, how hip hop helps move us toward a decolonized future, one that challenges assumptions about Indigenous people being incapable of living in the present, as modern subjects. I describe this process below.

We should embrace what Leech Lake Anishinaabe scholar Scott Richard Lyons calls “indigenous modernity.” Lyons writes that, “to embrace [indigenous] modernity is to usher in other modern concepts (not all of them necessarily, but some of them, and I’d say the ones we want), including the concept of decolonization.” Indigenous people have embraced hip hop as a modern culture/concept, too. Indeed, hip hop allows for Indigenous people today to create new definitions of what it means to be both Indigenous and modern. In answering to criticism that Native people engaging with hip hop is not a “traditional” practice of Indigenous people, Indigenous arts collective Beat Nation has responded accordingly,

There has been some criticism over the years by older community members who see [Hip Hop’s] influence as a break from tradition and the movement of the culture towards a pop-based mainstream assimilation. But in Beat Nation we see just the opposite happening. These artists are not turning away from the traditions as much as searching for new ways into them.⁴⁵

Traditions are not some static things that Native people are bound by. Language is of course central to a community’s survival, and big ups to those who work on language reclamation projects. However—while I appreciate ceremony and the use of language—we are people who create meanings and traditions everyday. Native people do not live in a cultural vacuum. While Native hip hop artists surely participate in what we might

call “traditions,” they are not bound by what that means. More than this, they create new ideas of what it means to be Indigenous.

Indigenous Hip Hop, Settler Colonialism, and Cultural Sovereignty

For Indigenous communities, the term “sovereignty” is a crucial component of everyday cultural, economic, social, and political life. In 1995, Osage theorist Robert Warrior advocated for intellectual sovereignty. He reasoned that “if our struggle is anything, it is the struggle for sovereignty, and if sovereignty is anything, it is a way of life.”⁴⁶ Controlling our knowledge production and how that is represented in popular culture is very important. With the continued use of Native American imagery in settler-stream US popular culture, what Philip Deloria described as “playing Indian,” we need to be very careful about how Native people and their images are represented while simultaneously challenging and producing as “accurate” Indigenous imagery as we possibly can.⁴⁷

This is, of course, another component of intellectual sovereignty, what Michelle Raheja has called “cultural sovereignty.” She has worked to make sure that we do not forget the importance of culture as a contributing force in promoting Indigenous sovereignty. “My argument about sovereignty does not stand in opposition to the works by my social science colleagues,” writes Raheja.⁴⁸ Instead, “it is critical to insist on a much broader notion of sovereignty . . . in cultural forms as diverse as dance, film, theater, the plastic arts, literature, and even hip-hop and graffiti.”⁴⁹ Indigenous hip hop is a part of the political, cultural, and social milieu of the Indigenous struggle for sovereignty.

Indigenous hip hop is an expression of Indigenous cultural sovereignty. It is an expression of Indigenous modernity to the max. It is also unique because of the cultural exchanges between black culture(s). It is rooted in Native history and present realities. Crucially, Indigenous hip hop is not bound by the archaic notion of Native “traditional” ways of life whatever that means. It is built on Native histories, but constructed by people who are attempting to live for the now and the future of

Indigenous sovereignty. Native hip hop artists are interested in showcasing how Native people actually live.

While hip hop is a black art form, especially in language, Indigenous people make it their own, rhyming out their own lived realities, in both reserve/ation and urban spaces. We should not place limits on the pluralisms and possibilities of being Indigenous in modern times. In other words, we should embrace the potential of hip hop culture.

Music has always been a part of Indigenous peoples' expressive culture and a part of their cultural and political sovereignty. Music has been crucial to Indigenous survival. Today, Indigenous music, especially hip hop, has served as an important part of Indigenous modernity and force for challenging settler colonialism. Shana Redmond writes that music is a method and that,

Beyond its many pleasures, music allows us to do and imagine things that may otherwise be unimaginable or seem impossible. It is more than sound; it is a complex system of mean(ings) and ends that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moment.⁵⁰

Redmond's use of music as an anthem for the African Diaspora is also true for Native people. It helps Native people imagine a future free from the strangling grip of colonialism and its effects. It is full of meanings that Native people can grasp onto in order to first imagine and then alter their futures, through hip hop.

Settler Colonialism

A note on settler colonialism is necessary here, as it is a defining feature of the everyday life of Native people. Patrick Wolfe might be one of the most important minds on settler colonialism. He writes, "Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element."⁵¹ I agree here, and do not have much to add. The underlying component of settler colonialism is about gaining land. Missing from Wolfe's formulation, though, is the impact, both cultural and political, that settler colonialism has on

Native people. Therefore, I am compelled to rely on the work of Indigenous scholars to explain how it functions.

Yellow Knife Dené scholar Glen Coulthard provides more complex discussions of settler colonialism. For Coulthard, settler colonialism today, in addition to being about land dispossession, is also about recognition in a liberal paradigm. He argues that this current era of tribal communities seeking and gaining recognition from the state “in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition.”⁵² Coulthard also explains the type of relationship that settler colonialism reproduces:

A settler colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of domination, that is, it is a relationship whose power in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.⁵³

Coulthard takes settler colonialism to another level from Wolfe. He illustrates how race, gender, and state power all contribute to Indigenous dispossession. Of course, Indigenous dispossession is the major goal of a settler colonial state, but there are many ways in which this happens, and it is not outside of other social categories. Those are all important parts of understanding the process of settler colonialism and, at times, Native peoples’ participation in those processes.

Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd writes that settler colonialism can be a transit, as well as a site through which to champion multiculturalism, or what people today call postracialism. On the former, Byrd writes, “as a transit, Indianness becomes a site through which US empire orients and replicates itself by transforming those to be colonized into ‘Indians’ through continual reiterations of pioneer logics, whether in the Pacific, the Caribbean, or the Middle East.”⁵⁴ Byrd’s brilliant use of using indigeneity as a transit allows us to understand how, historically and today,

settler societies use their method for subjugating Indigenous histories and people as a mechanism through which to do the same to other marginalized people around the globe.

Second, the contemporary rhetoric of postracialism has dominated discourses during the presidency of Barack Obama. Perhaps most important for my purposes, is how Indianness is used in settler colonialism to control Native people and images, both literally and figuratively. “Images of American Indians in Western cultures, images that reify savageness and any ‘primitiveness,’” writes Byrd, “rely upon emptying them of any tribal manifestation of identity, history, and culture, then filling them instead with those signifiers that assert mastery and control.”⁵⁵ As Byrd identifies, these images are used to control Native bodies and also to ignore their contemporary realities. These are but two examples of the effects of settler colonialism.

Within a settler colonial state, Indigenous hip hop artists have a unique opportunity to raise the consciousness of Indigenous America to challenge colonialism in everyday forms. This should “continue to involve some form of critical individual and collective self-recognition on the part of Indigenous societies,” writes Coulthard, “but with the understanding that our cultural practices have much to offer regarding the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world built on principle of reciprocity and respectful coexistence.”⁵⁶ Native artists continue to challenge colonialism, and will continue to do so, raising consciousness, one performance and rhyme at a time.

Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes is guided by at least three questions. First, how do Indigenous people construct indigeneity through hip hop culture? Second, in what ways does hip hop culture serve as a mechanism through which to construct sovereignty? Lastly, how does Indigenous peoples’ engagement with and production of hip hop challenge mainstream stereotypes about Indigenous people as being relics of the past?

In order to answer these questions, this book will rely on several conceptual frameworks and methods to gather and analyze data. First, I will interview Native hip hop artists and ask them several questions that are centered on the themes of the book. I will choose these artists

through snowball sampling and personal connections, hoping to get an equal representation in both tribal heritage(s) and gender(s). Second, I will collect data from a variety of sources. Because Indigenous hip hop is not very well known (in the mainstream sense), I will consult Indigenous media sources such as Indian Country Today Media Network, websites, as well as relying on the networks of artists that I have relationships with. I will analyze music, videos, and other forms of artistic expression in order to understand how race, gender, and indigeneity are constructed within hip hop. I am interested in forming a greater understanding of indigeneity as an analytic within Indigenous studies, as well as enhancing an already robust hip hop studies scholarship.

Organization of the Book

This book is not a comprehensive study of Indigenous hip hop culture. Instead, it is organized around the idea that Native artists in hip hop culture use a variety of methods to position themselves as modern people. The essays also highlight one of my intellectual interests: the intersections of blackness and indigeneity, which remains a marginalized subfield in both black and Indigenous studies. The essays in this book are thematic. That is, while they are connected by broader themes of Indigenous cultural representation, gender, and sovereignty as they manifest themselves through hip hop culture, they are still distinct. Ultimately, they are intellectual musings that I present here after presenting and conducting workshops from Toronto to Macon, Georgia, to the South Side of Chicago. There are six chapters total, the contents of which I explain below.

In chapter one, I argue that Native hip hop is a form of cultural sovereignty. Using Scott Richard Lyons's concept of Indigenous modernity and Michelle Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty, this chapter argues that Native artists not only challenge colonialism, but also offer a wide range of ideas for understanding the possibilities for imagining Indigenous future, where a great diversity of Native identities and expressive cultures can exist, with the overall goal of Indigenous sovereignty.

This chapter places Indigenous hip hop within the current political project of social movements in Canada and the United States, including #NativeLivesMatter, #NotYourMascot, Idle No More, and Walking With Our Sisters. Thus, Indigenous hip hop serves as the anthem for these movements for Indigenous sovereignty. This chapter also argues that Indigenous hip hop complements these social movements because it helps control the discourse of Native representation. This chapter also analyzes the premier of *Rebel Music: Native America*. Notably, it documents the importance of this mainstream representation, and why it matters for the future of disrupting Native stereotypes.

Chapter two analyzes Indigenous hip hop fashion. This chapter argues that Native people are carving out a niche within the hip hop community by wearing particular forms of Indigenous beadwork—what is called “Native bling”—and also adorning their bodies with tattoos, in order to highlight the variety of forms of Indigenous cultural expression. More than simply being a form of expression, Indigenous hip hop fashion serves as a cultural artifact, embedded with meaning and stories that allow Native people to assert their humanity in ways that directly confront the politics of colonialism. At the same time, Indigenous fashion must constantly fight against the colonial baggage of racist depictions. Some artists attempt to capitalize on these images, to varying degrees, still, with the ultimate goal of promoting Indigenous sovereignty.

Chapter three explores the competing notions of blackness and indigeneity within hip hop culture. While hip hop studies scholars have analyzed how whites have engaged in cultural appropriation, they have failed to examine how Indigenous hip hop artists—while not participating in cultural appropriation with a maliciousness of purpose, i.e., for commercial gain—do appropriate forms of blackness that contribute to its art. Similarly, scholars in Indigenous studies have analyzed how whites have engaged in cultural appropriation. This chapter complicates that narrative by arguing that it is neither this nor that, but somewhere in between, and we should acknowledge the complexities of hip hop culture, which allow for a range of artists to make it their own. Using black and Indigenous studies scholarship on black and Indigenous popular

culture such as Mark Anthony Neal's concept of the post-soul aesthetic and Dean Rader's concept of "engaged resistance," this chapter argues for an Indigenous hip hop aesthetic that appreciates the uniqueness of both black American and Native American influences on Indigenous hip hop culture.

While Indigenous artists have a unique form of hip hop, we often forget that hip hop was formed as and remains a black cultural product (though there is some work that includes the Latinx influence in the foundational years). As a result, blackness cannot be erased from any form of Indigenous hip hop, especially in aesthetic, style, and language. This does not negate the uniqueness of Native hip hop. Instead, it expands the possibilities, and allows for scholars to more critically engage with the intersections of blackness and indigeneity, adding to the rich but often mundane scholarship of Afro-Indigenous studies.

Chapter four critically engages with how Native artists understand and construct gender within their art. Central to the chapter's theoretical foundation are Sam McKegney's *Masculindians: Conversations About Indigenous Manhood* (2014) and a variety of Native feminist scholars in developing a theory of gender in Indigenous hip hop culture. For example, this chapter analyzes the lyrics and images in Lakota rapper Frank Waln's "My Stone" video, which I read as an example of how Indigenous feminism can inform and help reconstruct Indigenous masculinity.

At the same time, in keeping with the idea that Native people are modern subjects, and hoping to avoid re-stereotyping how Native people are *supposed* to behave, I discuss the not-so-flattering picture of Native hip hop artists who do not necessarily promote a progressive view of gender in some of their work. Thus, this chapter complicates ideas of what Native gender(s) looks like in hip hop culture, and thereby avoids the many pitfalls of scholarship that focus only on the "positive" representations of Indigenous expressive culture.

In chapter five, I take an unconventional approach by presenting an interview that I did with Sicangu Lakota hip hop artist Frank Waln. While it might be conventional to critically analyze the interview, Frank and I have a prior working relationship, and I wanted to share with others