

“I’M NOT A RAPPER, I’M AN ACTIVIST WHO RHYMES”: NATIVE AMERICAN
HIP HOP, ACTIVISM, AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IDENTITIES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: “I’m Not a Rapper, I’m an Activist Who Rhymes”: Native American Hip Hop, Activism, and Twenty-First Century Identities

In this thesis, I examine the ways in which a growing number of Indigenous artists in the United States and Canada are using hip hop not only as a form of artistic expression, but also to vent frustration about and to draw attention to contemporary issues affecting their communities. These artists participate in a tradition of politically conscious performance that has influenced and been influenced by Indigenous social movements across North America. Indigenous hip hop serves to affirm and redefine twenty-first century Indigenous identities, disrupting and reinterpreting stereotypical representations of Native Americans in a process which I describe as an “authenticity loop.” By utilizing artistic choices and strategic representations of indigeneity, the artists I examine have firmly established that they along with their communities are not remnants of the past, even as they maintain a continuity between previous generations and the present day.

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Dedicated to Adrienne Crookes and Wilma Boe.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A young man sits in a chair, blindfolded by an American flag, hands bound. A dark sheet behind him creates a non-descript background that might evoke multiple situations: perhaps he is a kidnapping victim held hostage; perhaps he is a captured terrorist. His mouth is taped shut, and written on the tape is the word “NDN,” shorthand slang for “Indian.” The young man is Frank Waln, a Sicangu Lakota hip hop artist from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. He sits blindfolded and gagged in the music video for his song, “Oil 4 Blood,” which he wrote to protest the building of the Keystone XL pipeline across tribal land. In the song, Waln criticizes oil companies for their profiting at the expense of Indigenous communities: “Make everything red / Words of my ancestors up in my head / Food for thought, our kids underfed / Your oil is mud, they want the earth dead” (Waln). For Waln and other Indigenous rappers, hip hop has become a means to cultural empowerment, a way to process historical trauma, and a vehicle for political critiques that resonate with recent social movements such as Idle No More, Missing and Murdered, Save Oak Flat, and Native Lives Matter.

While many top 40 hip hop artists are represented by large corporate labels and produce songs that glamorize gang violence and misogyny, the hip hop genre has also been a medium of social protest since its creation. A growing number of Indigenous artists in the United States and Canada are using hip hop not only as a form of artistic expression, but also to vent frustration about and to draw attention to contemporary issues affecting their communities. This hip hop utilizes strategic performances of indigeneity to advocate for political action and community empowerment, reaching both local and

national audiences. Indigenous hip hop gives a voice to marginalized groups, but also speaks to the ways in which performing a certain type of identity has allowed these artists to challenge settler colonial identities and advocate for contemporary issues. Embedded in this is a narrative of how Native artists have used public interest in Indian identities to shape federal policies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In this paper, I examine the ways in which Nataanii Means, Frank Waln, Supaman, and other young American Indian rappers have utilized hip hop as a means of public discourse to encourage conversations in their own communities and with larger national audiences. To begin, I will examine the ways in which Indigenous hip hop artists have used music to both affirm and redefine twenty-first century Indigenous identities and interpretations of “authenticity.” These artists use hip hop to disrupt and reinterpret settler colonial representations of Native Americans in a process which I describe as an “authenticity loop.” By doing so, they participate in a tradition of politically conscious performance that has influenced and been influenced by a series of Indigenous social movements across North America. The artists I discuss in this paper have utilized artistic choices and strategic representations of indigeneity to firmly establish that they along with their communities are not remnants of the past, even as they maintain a continuity between previous generations and the present day.

The rise of social media and the globalization of hip hop have provided new platforms for marginalized communities to voice frustration and to advocate for political change. In *The Organic Globalizer*, Christopher Malone and George Martinez describe hip hop’s close relationship to communities: “No matter its pervasiveness or its reach around the world, hip hop ultimately remains—and, we argue, should remain—a

grassroots phenomenon that is born of the community from which it permeates” (2). In other words, even as hip hop expands outwards to encompass new styles, new artists, and new audiences, its individualized forms remain linked to specific people, places, and spaces. As music distribution has shifted from commercial outlets to online platforms such as SoundCloud and YouTube, artists rely heavily on social media and word of mouth to promote their music. Because the artists in this paper are involved in movements that are often rooted in particular places and affecting particular communities, their relationships to the families, friends, and fans that support their music are even more intricately linked.

CHAPTER II

INDIGENOUS HIP HOP'S "AUTHENTICITY LOOP"

Over the last three decades, hip hop has become a central vehicle that many artists have adopted to share their stories and messages with the public. While hip hop originated as a form of expression in low-income African American communities, it has since spread to cultures all over the world. In examining the power of hip hop to build identities, Kembrew McLeod views early hip hop artists using the genre to construct individualism against an oppressive mainstream culture. For this reason, McLeod sees hip hop transferring to marginalized cultures worldwide as a tactic to push back against local assimilatory practices and maintain an "authentic" sense of cultural identity. Rather than "conform" to what the dominant culture values and expects of them, suppressed groups have used hip hop to construct identities that can resist these expectations. For Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada, hip hop has become a way to maintain cultural solidarity and to defy dominant discourses that situate Native American cultures as remnants of the past.

Not only can hip hop help carry cultural identities, but it can also negate harmful identities imposed on a group from those outside it. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King (Cherokee) wrestles with the concept of "authenticity" as he considers the discrepancies between some of contemporary Native people and the traits that the general public associates with legitimate, or "authentic" Indians. He writes:

In the past, authenticity was simply in the eye of the beholder. Indians who looked Indian were authentic. Authenticity only became a problem for Native people in the twentieth century. While it is true that mixed-blood and full-blood rivalries predate this argument, the question of who was an Indian and who was not was easier to settle. (54)

When King speaks of the “problem” of authenticity in the twentieth century, he refers to the ways in which decades of federal policies to assimilate Indigenous communities into the mainstream Anglo-American public have impacted some of the geographic, political, and cultural components of Indigenous identities (55). While the traits of “authenticity” once pertained to appearance, language, and lifestyle, King notes that these markers have become less stable indicators of Indigenous identities over time. Instead, “authenticity” has become increasingly difficult to define as many Native people have moved from rural to urban areas, adopted English as a primary language, and experienced a degree of separation from their traditional cultural practices.

As King observes, “authenticity” is an elusive concept to define, but it is often tied to legitimacy and inclusion or exclusion. Lauren Amsterdam theorizes that Native American hip hop works to refuse stereotypical expectations about Native Americans in U.S. culture while creating space for the inclusion of new definitions of “authenticity.” In “All the Eagles and the Ravens in the House Say Yeah: (Ab)original Hip-Hop, Heritage, and Love,” she describes hip hop as a form of expression that enables Indigenous artists to free themselves from settler colonial imaginings of Natives as pure, mythical, and vanishing. She writes: “Practicing hip-hop is political because it shatters the benchmark of authenticity, a standard of quantifying *real* indigeneity, in the service of territorial acquisition” (56). In other words, Native American artists adopt hip hop as a form of expression in order to prevent colonial powers from limiting the times and places in which they may express their cultural heritages and contemporary aspirations. Rather than isolating older cultural traditions from contemporary influences, these artists

incorporate a variety of influences into their work to challenge listeners to reconsider what they consider “authentic” Indigenous music and people to be like.

Indigenous hip hop intervenes in conversations about the “authentic,” the traditional, and the contemporary by providing a space for hybrid creations that help expand and redefine these concepts. For example, when rapper Supaman (Crow) wears traditional dance regalia and beat boxes in “Prayer Loop Song,” he expresses an Indigenous identity that confounds stereotypical representations of Native Americans. Likewise, when Drezus (Cree-Salteaoux) brings together traditional drum circles and glow-in-the-dark face paint with electronic beats in “Warpath,” he expresses how intimately his cultural heritage has been linked to the music he produces. Amsterdam likens hip hop’s practice of music sampling, taking a sound and putting it somewhere else, to the product that is made when Indigenous rappers use hip hop to tell their stories. The result is a type of colonial resistance that bridges the past and present, allowing the artists to share their stories in new ways while “sampling” the old.

At the same time, Indigenous artists have been able in some cases to mobilize an audiences’ desires for “authentic” performances in order to shape public perceptions about Native Americans. As a result, Indigenous hip hop creates what I have labeled an “authenticity loop” that feeds back into itself as the artists both break and redefine what it means to be an Indigenous person in North America, oscillating between newly-created identities and long-held traditions. When First Nations group A Tribe Called Red blends electronica and hip hop with traditional Cree vocals, it is difficult to define the product as “authentic” or “artificial.” The music is something that is both uniquely Indigenous and uniquely intercultural, completely “authentic” and completely constructed. The two can’t

be separated from one another, and each source samples the other. These new forms can challenge previously-held assumptions about what an “authentic” Indigenous song sounds like, particularly those constructed and produced in mainstream media.

Along with “sampling” new and old elements of cultural expression, the artists I will examine in this paper have all used the message of music as a channel to promote the social and political causes they support. Music has political potential because of the relationship it creates between the performer and the audience; when an artist sings or plays in front of a crowd, everyone watches and listens. As a result, music can be used as a platform to share political and cultural messages in an arena in which people are willing to be audiences. With hip hop, this opportunity is amplified because of the communal nature of hip hop performances, including interactions with the audience and with other performers. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, Indigenous performances have made appeals for political and social change, both within their own communities and with the non-Native public. These calls for action have often been situated within social and political movements concerned with sovereignty, identity and representation, and the welfare and protection of Indigenous communities.

In November 2014, MTV featured several Indigenous hip hop artists in the documentary *Rebel Music: Native America* on its Facebook page, resulting in over 4.7 million views and 93,000 shares in the six months after its release.¹²³ The choice to dedicate an entire episode to Indigenous artists speaks both to the unique legal and

¹ MTV. “The highly anticipated untold story about America begins. Watch Rebel Music: Native America and tell us what you think!” *Facebook.com*. 13 November, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/MTV/videos/10152456634446701/>
11 May, 2015

political status of Native American citizens and to the high level of political activism emerging from these communities and from social media. The documentary features hip hop artists Frank Waln, Nataanii Means and Mike “Witko” Cliff (Oglala Lakota) along with pop / R&B artist Inez Jasper (Skowkale). While introducing viewers to the artists’ music, the show also introduces each individual in the context of the issues they support—lobbying for environmental justice, teen suicide prevention, and safety for Indigenous women. The first few segments of the documentary interview the artists separately to tell their individual stories, and then the four travel to New York City together to gather for the People’s Climate March in Times Square. The documentary begins energetically and ends with the musicians determined to continue to use their music to advocate for social change.

While there are limits to the range of messages that the artists can give to viewers on national television, *Rebel Music: Native America* is successful in highlighting some of the most pressing issues that Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada currently face. While the special is not able to delve into some of the historical details and the depth of the heritage of activism in their work, the show still offers the artists with an opportunity to tell their stories firsthand. It provides an energetic, optimistic view of the artists and their potential to effect changes in their communities. Focusing on the artists rather than on the music puts a sympathetic face to the music—viewers get to see Inez Jasper say into the camera: “I have to be a rebel just to be myself” and see her as an individual, rather than as another musical product to be consumed (MTV). The focus on the artists and their activism also creates a narrative of protest that shows results. Footage of hundreds of people flooding the streets and waving banners that read “WATER IS

LIFE” is powerful and highlights how communities coming together for a cause can create an impact. A closer look at the relationships between the artists and the movements that they support can help fill in the complicated and nuanced relationships between Indigenous artists, activism, and performances of identity.

CHAPTER III

A LEGACY OF PROTEST

Long before MTV featured Indigenous rappers such as Frank Waln and Nataanii Means on *Rebel Music: Native America*, Indigenous musicians were using public performances as a way to draw attention to Indigenous rights and activism. John Troutman describes the power of music to communicate political messages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

Musical performances provided access to public forums...for questioning and challenging the propriety of the federal government to assume control over Native lands, resources, and education. Music *mattered*, as a means not simply of resistance but of active involvement in the shaping and implementation of federal policy initiatives. Music operated in a decisively political manner, just as it operated in other social and cultural contexts. (80)

In other words, Indigenous artists from this period were able to use their music for political means, to effect changes in government policies and in society. John Troutman and Philip Deloria both point out that this was possible, even in a time in which assimilation policies suppressed tribal cultural markers such as clothing and dancing, because there was still a public interest in experiencing the excitement of “authentic” Indian performances. Artists in this era utilized this interest in “authenticity” to help them launch careers in entertainment, but also to promote causes that they cared about.

However, “unsanctioned” cultural performances, regardless of their potential to be “authentic,” were interpreted as potentially threatening. For example, controversy over how to interpret performances of the Ghost Dance on the Pine Ridge reserve contributed to U.S. military intervention in the area and ultimately resulted in the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. Alternately, later performances of the Ghost Dance in traveling Wild

West shows were popular forms of entertainment and a way for audiences to experience an “authentic” Indian act. While the Ghost Dance itself was a syncretic product of Indigenous and Christian beliefs that developed in the “contemporary” 1880s, its perception as an “authentic” form illustrates the complex relationship between “traditional,” “authentic,” “contemporary,” and “modern” creations.⁴ Furthermore, the dramatic contrast in reception of this “authentic” dance in two different contexts demonstrates the limitations, potential, and stakes of utilizing moments “onstage” to incorporate implicit and explicit political appeals into performances.

Early American Indian intellectuals such as Charles Eastman, Zitkala-Sa, and Luther Standing Bear were all advocates for the protection and welfare of Indigenous peoples and mixed elements of activism with performance. Standing Bear and Eastman would often attend public speaking events wearing full Sioux regalia and feathered headdresses, and Zitkala-Sa would give musical and lyrical performances in costume. Lucy Maddox notes in *Citizen Indians: Native Americans, Race, and Reform* that these authors all utilized images of themselves as “Indian” to juxtapose Indianness with the markers of U.S. citizenship in order challenge the stereotypes and assumptions that Indians were primitive, uneducated, and warlike. Maddox writes:

“...Indian people were performing their histories, their successes and failures, their political appeals, and their individual and collective identities before a largely white American public...Indian people had to position themselves on the literal as well as the figurative stages of American public life, through strategic moves, as a way of inserting their embodied selves into the national consciousness and establishing their claim to a place on those stages.” (5)

⁴ Gregory Smoak describes the emergence of the Ghost Dance religion as a response to colonization that incorporated elements of both Christianity and Indigenous beliefs, but promoted an Indigenous identity. See *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century*.

Maddox situates these performances as a means of establishing their ongoing presence in the public sphere. When individuals like Charles Eastman, who received a formal education at Dartmouth and attended medical school, spoke while wearing a traditional, “primitive” headdress, he allowed his white audience to perceive him as both “civilized” and “Indian.” In turn, these performances became a means to reflect upon, challenge, and change the rights and status of American Indians living within the United States.

From Wild West shows to early Hollywood films to public lectures and exhibitions, performing and embodying “Indian” identities in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided a possibility for artists and activists to alter the general public’s perception of these identities. Phil Deloria documents early twentieth century Indigenous musicians who were able to use musical talent to complicate their audiences’ racial understandings of Native peoples, such as when Tsianina Redfeather (Creek / Cherokee) combined buckskin dresses with opera “to refuse to be seen either as a remnant or as an object of assimilation” (213). Similarly, Canadian author and performer E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk) would wear a beaded, buckskin dress for the first half of her performances, only to emerge in the second half wearing a Victorian gown. At times, she would read poems about “Indian” experiences while in Victorian dress, and vice versa. She would also occasionally reverse the order of her costume changes, appearing in Victorian dress first and reemerging in her Indian costume. These performance tactics demonstrate the artist’s awareness of her audience’s expectations and her desire to disrupt or challenge those expectations. Johnson’s reversal of costume change also challenges the narrative of “progress” that situates contemporary Anglo-American values and culture as the continuation and replacement of their Indigenous counterparts. Instead, her use of

costume helps demonstrate that “tradition” and “modernity” are not mutually exclusive terms, and are concepts that inform and complicate one another.

These blends of influences, clothing, and performance styles helped show that these artists and activists were complex individuals who were neither “uncivilized” nor ready to relinquish their Indian statuses. In some cases, these performances of identity involved sacrifices in specificity, such as wearing clothing the audience would quickly recognize as “Indian,” even if it did not pertain to the performer’s specific tribal affiliation. In other cases, it involved adopting nontraditional forms of music and appropriating them to express traditional cultural values. Because the primarily white audiences viewed Indianness as a mode of performance and entertainment, they were often not able to recognize the complex identity politics that arose from Indians stepping into constructed “Indian” identities on stage.

These early artistic performances demonstrate that music has long offered Indigenous performers a way to expand how their audiences perceived them. However, while music has continued to be utilized in defying settler colonial imaginings of Native Americans in the twenty-first century, there has been a shift in the tone and intended audience of activist performances since the early twentieth century and the Progressive Era. While early public performances did offer individuals such as Eastman and Zitkala-Sa the opportunity to challenge public understandings of Native Americans, their assertions of Indigenous identities were confined to these performative moments on stage. Offstage, mainstream Anglo-American communities still prioritized the adoption of English, agriculture, and Christianity for Indigenous communities with little acceptance of their traditional linguistic, cultural, and spiritual practices. As a result,

activists in this era turned to subversive protests that relied on maintaining an ethos of civility, charity, and western education with their white audiences to avoid alienating them. In the decades that followed, protests for American Indian rights became both more overt and more forceful.⁵

With the rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 60s and 70s, Indigenous activists and artists demanded changes regarding ongoing grievances against the U.S. government such as treaty violations, degrading representations of Indians as sports mascots, and the lack of civil rights for Native Americans. This generation's participation in protest meant abandoning the image of the assimilated, Anglo-educated Indian and instead "reclaiming the outer trappings of 'Indian identity' by growing their hair, wearing 'feathers and beads' and using public displays of traditional drum groups in a protest format" (Laudrum 199). Rather than cultivating an identity that was intended solely for their audience, these protestors emerged as counterculture figures who simultaneously asserted Indigenous identities for the watching public and for themselves. AIM leaders such as Russell Means, Dennis Banks, and John Trudell used a revitalized image of indigeneity and "Red Power" to ignite public interest in AIM's mission and to declare political and cultural agency. While "reclaiming" cultural markers should be distinguished from a "performance," the media representations of AIM protestors had an appeal to non-Native audiences that evokes the performer-audience relationship of activists in a previous generation.

⁵ For more information about the practices and effects of the assimilation period and later reactions against it, see and *From Education to Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* by David Wallace Adams and *This Indian Country: American Indian Political Activists and the Places They Made* by Frederick Hoxie.

While the contemporary artists I discuss in this paper continue to advocate for legal action for their communities, their intended audiences are no longer primarily white. Instead, artists such as Nataanii Means and Frank Waln offer appeals either to a mixture of Native and non-Native listeners, or they turn inward to speak primarily to their own communities. Dark, painful lyrics such as those expressed in Nataanii Means's "Dead Presidents" serve a double purpose when they reveal struggles with depression, drug abuse, and cultural trauma. Not only do they promote awareness of social and environmental justice issues to a larger public audience, but they also serve a cathartic purpose for the artist and for listeners who have been impacted by these issues. In the song he describes members of his community huffing gas and hairspray, taking codeine pills, and cooking crack as forms of "Indigenous stress relief" (Means). He follows up these lines with: "Ain't it ironic that I want to spend dead men in my wallet who slaughtered my people / Andrew Jackson laughing in my back pocket / They say forget the past and move on / There's still uranium deposits coming out my faucet" (Means). Means links the harsh environments he has encountered to constant reminders of the history of colonial violence that caused them. By referencing historical figures such as Andrew Jackson next to contemporary water contaminations, he also connects past historical wrongs with ongoing trauma and injustice that can't simply be forgotten.

In "The Radical," Means asserts himself as a product and continuation of socially conscious hip hop artists and of AIM activists: "Step inside the militant minded, confined / Inside assigned confinement, picture the best / 'Pac and Nas combined with Russell and Dennis / At an AIM protest, check it / I grew up tough, underneath barbed wire cuts / See my scars aren't enough to tell my story" (Means). The song has a moderate tempo and

Means packs many syllables into each bar, at times exceeding the space available in each measure as he conveys his message. By evoking well-known African American artists Tupac and Nas in his introduction, he boasts of his credibility as an artist and sets the tone for the type of Indigenous-centered yet cross-cultural politically resonant music he wants to produce. His song goes on to encourage listeners to free their minds, to “throw that government money back in their face cuz we don’t need it” and to draw attention to struggles of contemporary people within his community who are not getting the support and dignity that they need to thrive (Means). He also establishes himself as an “authentic” and down to earth narrator by referencing his own scars and upbringing under barbed wire.



Fig. 1: A screen shot of a graffiti mural from Nataanii Means’s “The Radical” music video.

Means references the legacy of AIM in his life when he links his music to former AIM leaders Dennis Banks and to Russell Means, who was Nataanii's father. Nataanii samples an audio clip of his father describing what it means to be called "radical": "Maybe it is true [that] I am a radical," Russell Means muses, "Because all I've ever asked for, all I've ever demanded, all I've ever fought for, all I've ever been shot for, or been stabbed and beaten for, or thrown in jail and prison for, is to ask and demand...that the United States of America live up to its own laws" (Means). The incorporation of this clip is not only a reminder of his father's work for American Indian civil rights and its heavy cost, but also a reminder that the work continues into the present day. Immediately following this quote, Nataanii Means begins a new verse confronting some of the contemporary issues within his community that have discouraged him, such as drug use, suicide, and the loss of traditional knowledge. The song ends abruptly without closure as the beat fades out. This lack of resolution at the end of the song suggests that the final part has not yet been written.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS AND SELF-DETERMINISM

Many of the issues that AIM pursued concerning environmentalism, sovereignty, and legal representation continue to appear in the artists' music as we move to discuss twenty-first century performances. I have already touched on the controversy surrounding the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline through the discussion of "Oil 4 Blood." Native Lives Matter began as a Twitter campaign to raise awareness about the high level of police brutality against people of Native American descent. As of June 2015, the hashtag #NativeLivesMatter, has appeared on over 350,000 Twitter timelines. #IdleNoMore, a First Nations movement pushing for environmentally sustainable practices and improved Nation to Nation relations with the Canadian government, has appeared on over 6 million timelines since 2012. Finally, #TRC, which stands for Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, has appeared on 3.6 million timelines. TRC's mission is to educate people about the abuses that took place in Canadian Indian Residential Schools and to provide support and restitution for the survivors.⁶ Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr are spaces in which Indigenous activists can pursue social justice, share their stories and promote causes they care about, and gain support from those inside and outside their communities. These selected movements are only a sample of what exists online today.

The popularity and prevalence of hip hop, the ease of sharing music and ideas on online platforms, and the ongoing political and social movements of American Indian and

⁶These statistics are taken from Hashtracking.org, a data analysis site that measures the number of times a hashtag has been used on a given site. Accessed 7 June, 2015.

First Nations groups have all contributed to overlap between the artists' music and activism efforts. In 2015, rap artist Wab Kinew's Twitter timeline was saturated with links to the TRC campaign and he remains vocal about his involvement in First Nations rights and activism. Frank Waln has utilized his Instagram account to promote oil protest marches and coordinate meetings. Nataanii Means uses his Instagram account to promote youth benefit concerts and posts pictures of himself with Idle No More protestors in Washington. Quese IMC and Indigenize tweet their participation in Arizona rallies and marches to support protection of Oak Flat, an area sacred to the Apache tribe, from commercial development. Activism also shows up in the artists' songs themselves. Drezus raps about his parents' experiences in Canadian residential schools in "The Sequel" and Nataanii Means frequently mentions AIM and his father in his lyrics. Quese IMC raps that "The Indian Wars Never Ended." Not only have these artists used social media to promote their music and to promote the movements they care about separately, but they have also embedded references to the movements directly into their music in order to promote the two together.

When Frank Waln performs "Oil 4 Blood," it is in the context of decades of activism for land rights and petitions for more environmental accountability from the U.S. and Canadian governments. When he raps: "Red Nation rising / Revising our story they're televising / Child of the Plains, I see 20/20 / Poverty porn TV pimps us for money / Tell Diane Sawyer I am a warrior / Give me your camera, send Peltier your lawyer" he is drawing from a history of community resistance that extends far beyond the Keystone XL pipeline construction and into previous generations (Waln). The "poverty porn" and Diane Sawyer lyrics refer to Sawyer's *20/20* reporting on the Pine Ridge Indian

Reservation and its voyeuristic gaze into the lives of impoverished Native Americans without citing the historical disenfranchisements that led up to current conditions, and without implicating the viewer in any course of action. Rather than being “pimp[ed] for money” as “poverty porn,” Waln asserts that he is a warrior. In doing so, he asks for a revised, dignified, and multifaceted representation of Indigenous peoples that resonates with the protests of previous generations.⁷



Fig 2: A screen shot from Frank Waln's "Oil 4 Blood"

While “Oil 4 Blood” was written for the Keystone XL pipeline protest, it also continues to channel the activism of AIM. The lyrics contain a request for legal justice for Leonard Peltier, a member of AIM who was convicted of killing two FBI agents in a

⁷ Eve Tuck echoes this request for more multi-faceted representations in “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” in which she critiques studies that focus only on the suffering of Indigenous communities in a way that reinforces their “brokenness,” rather than highlighting their resilience.

1977 court case that has since been contested. When Waln asks Diane Sawyer to hand over her camera and send Peltier a lawyer instead, he implies that what he needs from onlookers is not pity, but legal action. The mention of this high-profile case in a twenty-first century song about oil demonstrates the interconnectedness of the issues and the reach that AIM has had. The song suggests that the same gaps in the legal system that have allowed Leonard Peltier to receive a questionable hearing have also led to the creation of oil pipelines over tribal land without tribal consent.

While “Oil 4 Blood” has an unsettling, discordant melodic loop that would make it difficult to play in a dance club, others such as “AbOriginal” follow a more radio-friendly format. In Waln’s most well-known song, he talks about the challenges of creating an Indigenous identity in a non-Indian setting. Even though the song focuses on Waln’s coming to terms with his cultural heritage, the lyrics still hearken back to his political stances. Wearing a black zip up hoodie in a dark room, he raps: “And so I’m Idle No More, rap the plight of the poor / Cuz educated warriors are vital to war / And we battling oppression / Got me stressing / Wondering if I’ll ever learn my lesson / Cuz I can’t let my people go (oh no)” (Waln). When Waln raps about the plight of the poor, such as those living on the Rosebud Reservation and elsewhere, he is bringing awareness to some of the everyday challenges that he and other Indigenous families face. By linking singing about the poor to “educated warriors,” he suggests that consuming lyrics about the plights of Indigenous communities leads to an understanding and “education” that can equip people for fighting back against oppression. Waln’s nod to the Idle No More movement in his lyrics further demonstrates the close relationship between activism and art that is present in many of his songs.

The Keystone XL pipeline controversy extends over the U.S. border into Canada, where it represents one of several environmental issues that are adversely affecting First Nations communities. Idle No More began in 2012 when Therese Spence (Attawapiskat) began a hunger strike to protest the adoption of a bill that would remove some environmental protections from thousands of lakes and rivers across Canada.⁸ Idle No More continues as a women-led grassroots movement to advocate for the fair treatment of First Nations people and land. Their Manifesto reads:

The state of Canada has become one of the wealthiest countries in the world by using the land and resources... Some of the poorest First Nations communities (such as Attawapiskat) have mines or other developments on their land but do not get a share of the profit. The taking of resources has left many lands and waters poisoned – the animals and plants are dying in many areas in Canada. We cannot live without the land and water. We have laws older than this colonial government about how to live with the land. (“The Manifesto”)

This movement continues to advocate for improved legislation to protect the rights of First Nations communities and for the Canadian government to honor its First Nations treaties. Activists have held rallies, teach-ins, peaceful demonstrations, and marches to call for legislative reform, but have also turned to social media to promote their cause to a wider audience. From coordinating “flash mobs” and round dances at local shopping centers to networking and sharing stories online, sites like Twitter have helped this ongoing movement gain followers and allies.

While Idle No More began as and continues to be a women-driven, women-led movement, male Indigenous artists have shown dedicated support for the movement through their music. A Tribe Called Red, Nataanii Means, Frank Waln, The NorthStars,

⁸ This removal stemmed from Bill C-45, regarding the Navigable Waters Act. Protesters also objected to the Indian Act, which affecting voting and treaty land rights. For a fuller description of these acts, see Idle No More “Calls for Change” on their site, <http://www.idlenomore.ca/callsforchange>

and Drezus have all embedded references to Idle No More in their lyrics and voice their support on social media. These artists still perform a type of a masculinity laced with swagger, toughness, and defeating the opposition, but depart from some of commercial hip hop's misogynistic trends.⁹ This gendered dynamic of Idle No More requires further exploration, but young, male support for female leadership suggests a growing potential for positive relationships between men and women in which Indigenous women are recognized for their important contributions to their communities.¹⁰

First Nations rapper Jeremiah Manitoopies, who performs under the name Drezus, has been heavily involved in the Idle No More movement. His song "Red Winter" received increased attention because of its affiliation with Idle No More. Like "Oil 4 Blood," "Red Winter" is written for the political arena, not for the club. It lacks the heavy basslines, energetic rhymes, and 808 drum beats of Drezus's other songs. Instead, the song has a slow, introspective feel and a melodic chorus sung by the artist rather than rapped. The video for "Red Winter" depicts footage of Idle No More protesters in various Canadian and U.S. cities and audio excerpts of a rally speech encouraging the protestors to keep fighting. The camera alternates between these images and Drezus wearing sunglasses, a backwards baseball cap, a beaded necklace, and a black hoodie as he sings: "You can lock us in jail and throw away the key / Take away my rights but you ain't stopping me / Cause I been quiet for too long / It's time to speak / We got to stand for

⁹ Tricia Rose's *The Hip Hop Wars* examines in more detail the ways in which many hip hop artists address women in hypersexualized, misogynistic terms.

¹⁰ I do not claim that all Indigenous artists have adopted this stance. For example, Stephanie Nohelani Teves notes in "'Bloodline Is All I Need': Defiant Indigeneity and Hawaiian Hip Hop" that artists such as Krystilez (Kanaka Maoli) use hip hop to communicate cultural pride, but still employ problematic depictions of women.

something to keep us free! / I'm Idle No More" (Manitopyes). The Canadian flag appears with a red, clenched fist holding a feather in the middle of it as hoop dancers and break dancers move in the background by the words "Indigenous Rights Revolution." The video and lyrics are an encouragement for solidarity and perseverance as protestors continue to pursue Indigenous rights with the Canadian government.



Fig. 3: A shot from Drezus's "Red Winter" music video.

Multiple pronoun usage appears in many of the songs related to contemporary activism, demonstrating the shift from earlier activists who addressed primarily white audiences to a more diverse contemporary audience representing contrasting viewpoints. The variations in the song between "I," "you," and "we" suggest that Drezus's intended audience consists of more than one type of group. One level of the song is introspective, discussing the artist's own inner reflections on his growing sense of obligation to speak

out in protest, and the “we” denotes solidarity among a larger group seeking a common goal. The “you,” whether singular or plural, suggests an opposing party that must be overcome or won over to the cause. This could be addressed to government officials, to critics, or perhaps even to First Nations listeners who have avoided becoming involved in the movement due to a desire to avoid the perceived risks and stigmas associated with political defiance. In contrast, Drezus argues that the time for action and has come. While he does acknowledge opposition in the lyrics, the primary focus of the song is turned inward to his personal experience and that of his fellow protesters, and less so on the critics. This suggests that the main goal of the song is to unite and encourage current supporters, rather than to appeal to a larger general public.

Although hip hop remains dominated by male performers, female rappers have also used hip hop to express identity and protest within and outside of their local communities. In British Columbia, Miss Christie Lee C “Crunch” (Musqueam) of the female hip hop group First Ladies Crew echoes Drezus’s determination to advocate for social and environmental change in “People of the Sea.” As a deep, repetitive bassline booms, she boasts: “I am here to say, ain’t no pipelines laying down / Not in my day, no way / This here is my life. I’m here to set this right / You brought the darkness, Now I bring the light / Gonna shine so bright, every day and night / I’m here to fight the good fight” (Charles). In this song, she offers an empowered image of herself as a defender against environmental exploitation. When she says, “This here is my life” she is claiming agency and ownership over what she will tolerate within her community. These lyrics demonstrate Miss Christie Lee’s positive and determined outlook to effect positive change. Rallying her listeners to stand with her, she says: “My people of the sea, it’s time

to be free / My people of the sky, now it's time to fly" (Charles). This track is more energetic than the solemn "Red Winter," although it still maintains a slow tempo and relatively few syllables per measure compared to a "club" song. The contained energy of a deep, repetitive bassline creates a steady, confident mood for her delivery that mirrors her confidence in her ability to "fight the good fight."

"Sisterz" by JB the First Lady (Nuxaulk / Onondaga) is both a protest song and a tribute to missing First Nations women in Canada. The beginning and end of "Sisterz" sample news coverage discussing the disappearances of up to 1000 Indigenous women from First Nations communities.¹¹ Soft guitar strokes and synth background contrast against the artist's forceful voice. JB shouts: "I'm looking for my sister / Where did she go, where did she go, why? / I want to walk the highways / I want to walk the alleys and streets / I want to walk the whole damn world" (Webster). Her voice remains steady and controlled as she delivers the lines about walking the highways and streets, and then escalates in pitch and volume as she describes wanting to walk "the whole damn world." With a tone alternating between anger and resignation, her pitch drops as she demands: "Why no sense of urgency? / Why no state emergency / Should have been called when it was two or three / Hundred to a thousand, yea, you feel me? / Governments criminalize Indigenous men / And then blame them, and then say, it's not high on our radar. / How far will you let it slide? / Just another form of genocide" (Webster).

¹¹ Along with concerns about the treatment of land and resources, Idle No More is also invested in the safety of First Nations people, particularly in relation to the disproportionately high homicide rate of Indigenous women in Canada. Missing and Murdered Women, or #MMIW, has developed as a movement to directly advocate for a national inquiry into these unsolved cases

JB uses pitch to communicate the range of her emotions as she describes the lack of attention to these disappearances. Her inflection rises as she sings, “hundred to a thousand” and then continues to fall while she describes a process of blaming Indigenous men and neglecting to give the disappearances the attention they deserve. When she asks how long people will “let it slide,” she is referring to the discouraging momentum of the situation, but her falling tone also “slides” until she reaches her emphatic delivery of the word “genocide.” Her rising tone conveys frustration and uncertainty over the missing women, but her steady diction on the word “genocide” demonstrates her certainty over how to interpret the events’ outcome. Along with her lyrics, JB uses her voice to convey a combination of anger, frustration, and determination that is gaining momentum.

These powerful performances contain explicit political messages and biting critiques of current legal and social issues affecting Indigenous communities. While hip hop’s politically conscious origins and communal format make it an ideal medium to express protest among communities, the songs I reference in this paper represent a continuity in a longer history of music as protest. While Indigenous performers in previous generations may not have expressed their concerns in the same way, they were invested in political issues such as sovereignty, representation, and civil rights that have remained ongoing goals among contemporary activists. Modes of presentation and the markers of “authentic” performances have changed through different eras, but the ongoing appropriation and indigenization of popular forms of music by Indigenous artists continues to provide the means for new expressions of contemporary identities.

When Drezus combines teepees and rap music, he demonstrates both a commitment to his cultural heritage and a reconsideration of what an “authentic”

Indigenous musician can be like. As an artist, he has balanced a Cree “warrior” image with a “thug/gangster” persona in his music. In older music videos, he appears with chain necklaces, oversized puffer jackets, and backwards baseball caps as he raps about his life on the street selling drugs. In *Noisey*, Drezus discusses the growing importance of celebrating his cultural heritage after attending drug rehabilitation and facing multiple incarcerations.¹² After reconciling with his family and becoming involved in Idle No More rallies, he began incorporating more traditional elements into his music. In more recent videos such as “Warpath,” he sports face paint, colorful Pendleton jackets and vests, and a beaded turquoise cross as he rallies for Native men to take a stand in their communities. He still incorporates some conventional urban hip hop images into the video, such as cruising in a lowrider car with his “posse” as the bass booms, but the car is driving down a rural dirt road surrounded by forest and the men are wearing traditional face paint and long hair. In doing so, he transforms “gangstas” into “warriors” who can accompany him into “battle” to reclaim control over their destinies and redefine First Nations masculine identities.

¹² See Reed Jackson’s “Drezus Walks: Native American Rapper Blends Old and New.”



Fig. 4: A video screenshot from “Warpath” by Drezus.

In “Champions” by The NorthStars (Quebec First Nations), the ingenuity of combining old and new elements to survive becomes a medium for asserting Indigenous pride. The artists rap about surviving tough conditions and boast of their resilience: “Rising from the underground buried in dirt / But now we’re standing on the frontline bringing the beats / Destroying opposition while we’re living the dream” (NorthStars). In the music video, the artists alternate between wearing hoodies and tees, camouflage hunting gear, and sunglasses and baseball caps. They rap in front of houses covered in plywood and on a mountaintop setting surrounded by forestry. There is also footage of a training athlete wearing a tank that says “First Nations Warrior” performing pushups and chin-ups in a construction yard and running along the highway shoulder. In the same way that the athlete never stops training, the video suggests that First Nations people will never stop celebrating their cultural identities, no matter how difficult it becomes.

While conveying a message about overcoming obstacles, the artists also demonstrate the ways in which their community has helped them become the artists that they are. They send a challenge to listeners: “To all the Nations / We banging on the drum / We’re claiming what is ours and it’s time to take it back” (NorthStars). The song fades to the community singing songs in their traditional language, showing that their heritage is alive and well. Not only do the artists affirm that they exist in modernity, but they also demonstrate that they have a continuity with the past. This video is firmly situated in a contemporary community, but it does not relinquish its connection to the artists’ history and culture. Like Drezus, The NorthStars combine contemporary and traditional elements in their video to complicate what it means to be a First Nations citizen in the twenty-first century.

Artistic combinations of traditional music and dress with contemporary music styles redefine what some might consider “authentic” Native American music to be. In being rooted in place and time (“here” and “now”), Native performers unhinge the settler colonial narrative that romanticizes tribes as people who existed in the past, but have no input or stake in contemporary issues. Instead, these artists produce music that is heavily invested in contemporary political and social issues that affect Indigenous communities. By combining hip hop with political messages, historical retellings, and expressions of cultural heritage, these artists firmly refuse being relegated to the past, even as they refuse to let the past go. The result is a constructed, authentic, traditional, and contemporary form of expression that both carries cultural identities and challenges dominant discourses that would delegitimize the expression of those identities.

To an extent, the artists I have discussed in this paper engage in political acts of refusal. Audra Simpson and Glen Coulthard both reference this refusal in terms of turning away from federal recognition and from reliance on United States and Canadian governments to determine Indigenous peoples' "legitimacy".¹³ Instead, they observe a growing movement that prioritizes self-determination and political autonomy to name and govern themselves. Simpson documents the Mohawks of Kahnawa:ke and their refusal to accept American or Canadian citizenship as one manifestation of this autonomy. She also cites the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team's refusal to play in the World Lacrosse League Championship after the United Kingdom would not recognize their Haudenosaunee passports as legitimate, as another instance (25). I argue that the artists I have examined represent yet another manifestation of this refusal. Their presence, musical contributions, and activism continue to advocate for the rights of Indigenous groups to preserve and create their own "authentic" identities as they pursue self-determination in the twenty-first century.

Whether incorporating buckskin with opera, beatboxing with traditional flutes, or substituting rural settings for urban ones, these blends of influences demonstrate the potential to challenge how national audiences perceive Indigenous communities. In turn, Indigenous performers have increasingly turned to their own communities as audience members to celebrate, redefine, and critique their relationships with tradition and with each other. The variety of means of expression and types of "authentic" Indigenous identities that are performed in the songs I have cited echo back to the previous

¹³ See Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* and Coulthard's *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* for further conversations regarding refusal of citizenship and other modes of federal recognition.

generations' use of performance in order to shape public images of Native Americans. Whether as "rebels," activists, artists, or "Natives," Indigenous musicians continue to disseminate politicized messages to public audiences in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways.

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