

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“WE THE NEW ANCESTORS”:
THE PASSING OF NATIVE HIP HOP BUNDLES ACROSS SPACE AND TIME

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Preface:
Ra Ximhai [Nuestra Tierra/Our Land/Our Grounding]

Ma thuju Jonah. Juädä thuju Otomí Hñähñu. Hmai thuju Juxmaye. My name is Jonah and my relations are of the Otomí Hñähñu People from Juxmaye, what is now known as the Mezquital Valley in México. My Otomí abuela was Maria de la Luz Victoria Sánchez Ramos of Ndathi [Celaya, Guanajuato]. Her parents were José Refugio Sánchez Granados—an Afromexicano—and María de Jesús Ramos Alvarado, or Mamá Chucha, a mujer indígena Otomí.

In February 2017, the University of Chicago's Department of Music notified me of my acceptance to their PhD program in ethnomusicology. I had not drafted a paper since high school, having gone to music conservatories, and my application writing sample was the first attempt at something scholarly. Upon the news of my acceptance, I began to think of all the things I might finally be able to do at an academic institution. My life up until that point had been surviving as a trumpet player as well as teaching private lessons on piano and guitar. It was at this moment that a thought occurred to me: I would finally have the resources to fully learn Hñähñu. I knew Chicago had a large Mexican population, and therefore, someone must be Otomí. I googled “Otomí Hñähñu,” and what instead came up in my search for Otomí folks in Chicago was Colectivo Membda’s “Hin to’o ngu nuga,” released on YouTube on February 21, 2017. I first saw the video only two days after its release, and as a lifelong fan of hip hop, I was so excited to hear hip hop in Hñähñu.

I grew up a hip hop head. My favorite album was Aceyalone’s Human Language. I used to make beats on my Sibelius 3 notation software, record the MIDI onto a mini disc, and write verses to these tracks. While my mom graded papers and did lesson planning at

the kitchen table, I would sit on the floor and record myself, getting my dad to sing the hooks for me. Years later, at Berklee College of Music, I got to start a hip hop group with some of my closest friends, leading us to open for Salt-N-Pepa. Despite my own intimate relationship to hip hop, hearing “Hin to’o ngu nuga” was different than anything I had before. Otomí group Colectivo Membda’s sonic tapestry reawakened something inside of me. In my quest to learn my Abuela’s language, I had expected to find dictionaries, grammar tools, sentence structure rules, and diction guidance. I found none of that, but, instead, I found Colectivo Membda and, with it, the Native hip hop bundles that they shared.

This dissertation is a product of my language journey, my love for hip hop, my own journey as a musician, and my familial history. It is something rooted so deeply inside myself that I had to reach and pull it out. When I did, it came rushing. This dissertation is a letter to my abuela. I wish more than anything that she could still be here to receive it.

Positionality

Born in 1926 to a family of eleven in Celaya, Guanajuato just after the Mexican Revolution, my abuela spoke the Hñähñu language of the Otomí people. The contours of her life were determined by at least two political moves in post-revolutionary México. The first change sought to “standardize a national education system” had already been made in 1921, when newly elected president Álvaro Obregón created the Ministry of Public Education, which was central to his goal of forming a Mexican nationalist identity.¹ One objective of the ministry was to “overcome the evolutionary distance which separates the Indians from the

¹ de León L. “Indigenous Language Policy and Education in Mexico.” In: McCarty T., May S. (eds) *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education*. Encyclopedia of Language and Education (3rd ed.). Springer, Cham, 2017, p. 4

present era, transforming their mentality, orientations and customs, [and] to incorporate them into civilized modern life.”² Second, my abuelita’s childhood also coincided with Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos’ 1924 public theorization of mestizaje. Detailing his vision for the newly formed race that informed Latin American nationalism, Vasconcelos hoped that, as time went on, African and Native blood would dilute and favor whiteness.³ In regard to Indigeneity and the racial system that my own Abuela grew up in, Vasconcelos wrote that

Dígase lo que se quiera, los rojos, los ilustres atlantes de quienes viene el indio, se durmieron hace millares de años para no despertar...Al cumplir su destino de mecanizar el mundo, ellos mismos han puesto, sin saberlo, las bases de un período nuevo, el período de la fusión y la mezcla de todos los pueblos. El indio no tiene otra puerta hacia el porvenir que la puerta de la cultura moderna, ni otro camino que el camino ya' desbrozado de la civilización latina.⁴

*Say what you will, the reds, those illustrious Atlanteans from whom the Indian descends, fell asleep thousands of years ago, never to awaken...In fulfilling their destiny to mechanize the world, they themselves have laid, without knowing it, the foundations for a new period, the period of the fusion and mixing of all peoples. The Indian has no other door to the future than the door of modern culture, nor any other path than the path already-cleared for Latin civilization.*⁵

Therefore, my abuela grew up in a political and social climate that defined Indigeneity as extinct. The only path forward—her only path forward as viewed by the state—was to

² Hamel, Rainer. “Indigenous Language Policy and Education in Mexico.” In: May, S. and Hornberger, Nancy H. eds. *Encyclopedia of Language and Education, 2nd Edition, Volume 1: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education*. Springer, 2008, pp. 301–313, p. 303.

³ Vasconcelos, José. *La Raza Cósmica — Misión de la raza iberoamericana: Notas de viajes a la América del Sur*. Madrid, Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925.

⁴ Ibid, p. 25

⁵ Translation mine

succumb to opening the “door of modern culture.” Instead of staying in her homeland, she left to obtain a Western education.

In 1943, she enrolled in the inaugural class of La Universidad Femenina de México, founded by feminist Adela Formoso de Obregón Santacilia.



Figure 1: This is a digital copy of my Abuela's graduation certificate from La Universidad Femenina de México dated June 19, 1948.

After graduating, none of the jobs she could find paid enough to support her large family, forcing her to turn her sights to the United States. When my abuelita migrated to New York in 1948 to work as a nanny, she had no one with whom to speak Hñähñu. Once she became a mother, she constantly reminded my dad and his siblings that they were Otomí as they navigated the complexities of fitting into the U.S. as first-generation students in New York in

the 1960s. My bisabuela, Mamá Chucha, had given my abuela a nickname and called her “Lucha.” And she did. She always fought for her family, her people, and her culture, despite crossing borders. Towards the end of her life, she asked my tía one day, “Ay Linda, ¿escribirías un libro para mí” [Oh, Linda, will you write my story]? As my tía said, of course, she meant to tell her story. My family’s story represents the power of mujeres indígenas [Native women]. They are the holders of knowledge, storytellers, and artists. My tía did end up writing a short story of my abuelita’s life. Below is the passage from my tía’s short story leading up to abuela’s migration to the United States. It is shared here without edits to honor her voice and memory.

The feminist movement in Mexico, spear-headed by Adela Formoso de Obregón Santacilia, had just landed a major victory: the 1943 founding of the first institute of higher learning for women in Mexican history, La Universidad Femenina de México. The opportunity did not exist for Lucha to become a doctor, so instead she enrolled to become a medical secretary—a rigorous course that included all the medical knowledge needed for the administration of a physician’s practice. Anatomy and Physiology was brutal, she told me, and the stress of completing her thesis gave her nightmares off and on for the rest of her life. All but four of the women in that inaugural class failed to graduate. But her father’s enduring influence convinced her that she was capable, and now that he was gone, earning the degree was more critical than ever.

She fought sleep as she studied in the closet-sized bathroom at Mamá Chucha’s house late into the night. (“The only place to be alone!” she told me.) To help them all, she also worked at a doctor’s office full-time. Even so, they were barely surviving. The

doctor's kind wife would often bring groceries when she suspected Lucha and the others had nothing to eat.

Doctor Faril had been impressed with Lucha's boldness and resolve when she first approached him for employment.

"As a matter of fact, I need someone to implement a more modern filing system for my practice. Are you familiar with...?"

She made a mental note of the name, emphatically assured him that yes, she was completely familiar, then went to the library and crammed like mad. By the time she arrived for her first day, it was no longer necessary to lie. Such was Mom's cleverness and determination.

That same resolve fueled the decision to board a bus for New York, despite having completed her degree. Several jobs after the kind doctor, she still wasn't making enough money to sustain them all, and something had to be done. Once a certain newspaper ad caught Lucha's eye, no one could dissuade her. She would secure the advertised position and become a governess in America. Her plan was to send as much money back as she could and to acquire enough English to bump up her pay scale in Mexico. Then she would come home.

In quiet resignation, Mamá Chucha prepared a small basket of chicken and tortillas for her daughter. It would be Lucha's only food for the trip. She rationed it, finishing just before the border in accordance with crossing restrictions. Then she ate nothing the rest of the way to New York.⁶

⁶ Falter, Linda. *A Question of Miracles*. Self-published, Forthcoming.

My abuela never did go home. Despite this, migration never severed her relations. Even in New York, she was still Otomí. Growing up in a time of assimilation and fear of being seen as different, my abuela did not teach them Spanish nor Hñähñu. However, despite this fear-based erasure of her language, she brought them home to México to reconnect with her family, and my dad and his siblings also identify as Otomí.



Figure 2: This is a picture of my extended family in México when they visited in the summer of 1974, with Mamá Chucha in the bottom right.



Figure 3: This is a picture from that same visit in the summer of 1974. Mamá Chucha is in the center, my dad with the fro and yellow shirt with his back to us, and my abuela with the glasses to the right of Mamá Chucha.

This is the familial lineage that I place myself in. As a geographically displaced Native person, I acknowledge that I am extremely privileged on multiple levels. To know that I am Otomí is already a privilege because mestizaje systematically erased knowledge of Native ancestry from millions of people in México. Additionally, my light skin affords me access and privilege to the freedom of movement in my day-to-day life that my darker-skinned, Afro-bearing dad will never have. As I move through academic spaces, I “acknowledge that real Indigenous people who look white make up a large proportion of Indigenous

academics.”⁷ Peguis scholar Jessica Kolopenuk furthers that, “we produce knowledge about indigeneity from this standpoint.”⁸ Therefore, it is imperative to engage and cite those scholars who are not white. I am constantly thinking about what Natives I see presenting at conferences, and how to balance honoring my ancestors while acknowledging the privilege that I hold through my whiteness. Therefore, giving back to the community and breaking down the barriers that often exist between academic knowledge and communities are paramount to me, as I can use my privilege to tangibly work towards them. I try to live by this ethos: I received the “Reimagining the University: Race + Arts Initiative” grant from the University of Chicago’s Center for the Study of Race, Politics & Culture, and was able to bring Diné hip hop artist Def-i to guest lecture in multiple classes as well as give a performance. I also received funding from the University of Chicago’s Pozen Center for Human Rights to bring Wari hip hop artist Bobby Sanchez to perform at the Center for Identity + Inclusion. Finally, through funding provided by the EthNoise! workshop, I was able to bring Kichwa hip hop artist and scholar Amy Killari Chalán to present her work. This dissertation collaborates—through many forms—with everyone I hold dear. It is for them, by them, and is them. My goal is to always center the voices of my homies, colleagues, and collaborators.

Migration, Transnationalism, and the Conflation of Native Experiences

This dissertation is a transnational and border crossing project, and, as such, requires specificity to articulate better how I am thinking about communities and their connections

⁷ Kolopenuk, Jessica. “The Pretendian Problem.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2023, pp. 468–473, p. 471.

⁸ Ibid, p. 471

to land. Many factors can cause migration, but at its simplest form, it is the movement from one place to another. As we move through the world, our connections to place, human kin, and more/other-than-human kin are constantly shifting and renewing in diverse ways. Culturally, however, movement requires a repositioning of oneself and one's ways of life to now be a part of a new ecosystem. Repositioning and renewing these relationships does not require severing kinship to a place of origin, but rather growing networks to make the unfamiliar familiar. This dissertation discusses Native hip hop artists from México, Canada, Greenland, Peru, and Ecuador. In doing so, the artists in this dissertation move across borders, and so does their music. Both their bodies and their sonic archives migrate and build networks with listeners across the Americas. For example, some artists are the children of migrants to the United States and remain connected to their ancestral homelands, while others live on their ancestral lands and tour across the United States. Colectivo Membda and Mare Advertencia Lirika have performed in Canada. Lirika performed in New York City on a bill with Oglala Lakota and Diné rapper Nataanii Means, as well as Wari rapper from the Peruvian diaspora and New York-born Bobby Sanchez. Native hip hop does not adhere to colonial borders, and it requires a transnational project to theorize better these ecologies of Indigeneity that attends to border crossing and migration.

Moti is the Hñähñu word for movement, and I conceive of this movimiento/movement/migration through relational ways of living and kinship. For my ancestors, the building of Tenochitlan, the expansion of surrounding cities and trading networks, and Spanish colonization forced many Otomí People into the Mezquital Valley, renewing and redefining their own relations with kin, such as maguey, a desert plant. Renewing of relations happens in the diaspora, too. The Otomí diaspora is always tethered

back to México. As diaspora exists only through movement, to think of *moti* as part of a broader network of kinship redefines migration from disconnection to renewed connection. Through *moti*, then, I conceive of Native hip hop networks as recalling a pre-colonial past where trading networks existed between Nations, passing knowledge and goods between people. Native hip hop networks of kinship reject capitalism and the Western curriculum as modes of measuring success. Indigeneity existed long before colonial borders. People migrated for various reasons across space and time, and even after the initial colonial borders, national identities continued to change. The Pueblo, Diné, Apache, Chumash, and so many other Nations were “Mexican” until U.S. westward expansion. Therefore, including Native hip hop artists from México in this project is to understand the network Native hip hop has built.

The transnational nature of this project also raises important questions and concerns about falling into the trap of conflating Native experiences. For example, statements such as “hip hop provided Natives with an outlet” can lack specificity and present Indigeneity as a monolith. Haida Nation criminal justice scholar Michaela McGuire (Jaad Gudghiljiwah) and criminologist Ted Palys argue that, “We must not accept these colonized or pan-indigenized notions of Indigenous programmes and processes as the end goal, not least because they conflate all Indigenous peoples as one and the same.”⁹ These conversations about how Indigeneity is viewed, presented, and analyzed are not new. In disagreement with McGuire and Palys, there have also been advocates for the potential of pan-Indigeneity, especially in the early 2000s.¹⁰ “Native hip hop,” as a marker, can easily

⁹ McGuire, Michaela (Jaad Gudghiljiwah) and Ted Palys. “Toward Sovereign Indigenous Justice: On Removing the Colonial Straightjacket.” *Decolonization of Criminology and Justice*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2020, pp. 59–82, p. 65.

¹⁰ Masaquiza, Martina and Pakal B'alam. “A Pan-Indigenous Vision of Indigenous Studies.” *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1–9.

flatten and conflate Indigeneity. However, there is much nuance to be explored in the formation of Native hip hop. There are Otomí hip hop practices, Yavapai-Apache hip hop practices, Wari hip hop practices, and Native hip hop practices specific to every Nation. At hip hop's creation in New York City, many others were pivotal to its growth, including the Latine bboy/bgrr group the Rock Steady Crew and Cree photographer Ernie Panicioli, who was inducted into the Hip Hop Hall of Fame. Black/Brown and Black/Native solidarities through hip hop draw on the legacy of organizations such as the Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Young Lords Organization, the Brown Beret Organization, and the leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM). Therefore, Native hip hop practices are specifically rooted in these histories and reflect collaborations between people and organizations, continuing to grow these networks of kinship on the ground.

To understand Native hip hop, then, is not just to look to its own history or to solely place it in conversation with Native music. While I will get into further details of coalition-building in chapter one, I use the brief framing of this subsection to argue that to talk about Native hip hop requires both synthesis of the intertwined social movements that shaped the Civil Rights era (and continued fights for social justice) as well as Nation/land-specific worldviews. When I make broad statements about Native hip hop in this dissertation, I hope that they are always read as a guide to take back to one's community. For example, when I argue in chapter three that Native hip hop ecologies are a hip hop practice that is an extension of the land, I am not contending that there is one story of the entirety of Native land that we must adhere to. To do so would be to conflate the impacts of colonization across thousands of Nations on Turtle Island. Rather, these broad

statements are their own bundles of knowledge that require the reader to reposition the statement's historical and cultural meaning within their own community. The process of listening to knowledge and then citing it, utilizing it, and expanding upon it is what I theorize as the sonic responsibility that Native hip hop gifts to listeners.

Sonic Responsibility

Sonic responsibility is not a passive way of engaging with music, and Native hip hop requires both collective and individual action from its listeners. Although I will expand upon sonic responsibility in my introduction, it is important to note how it relates to the possible conflation of Indigeneity. For example, early Native hip hop artists like Chichimeca and Cherokee rapper Litefoot and Cree hip hop group War Party brought knowledge, oral traditions, and relations from their communities into conversation with Black hip hop. Litefoot was Apsáalooke rapper Supaman's idol. For Supaman to draw on Litefoot's artistic practice was not only to make Apsáalooke hip hop, but also to make Apsáalooke hip hop in conversation with Chichimeca and Cherokee hip hop. Continuing down this path gets messy once thirty years pass, and therefore it is critical to state that the Native hip hop artists in this dissertation are not just making "pan-Indigenous" hip hop, but rather are attending to the sonic responsibility each track gifts to articulate their own worldview further. Artists today are constantly drawing on Native hip hop as kin. Native hip hop itself has relationships with hundreds of Nations and requires inter/intratribal relationships. To be a Native hip hop artist is to place oneself in the lineage of Native hip hop and hip hop more broadly, including future lineages.

Knowledge Futurities

Through sonic responsibility, Native hip hop also builds futures by passing on knowledge. Alutiiq education scholar Leilani Sabzalian argues that the rematriation of knowledge is something that “all curriculum theorists should wrestle [with] in order to theorize new futurities.”¹¹ As Sabzalian describes, knowledge builds futures and supports “projects that foster relationality, responsibility, and alliances.”¹² The path of knowledge acquisition to practice, however, is not intended to be direct. Learning about land stewardship from a Potawatomi ecologist is not meant to be a universal path towards stewardship, nor is it meant for me to take exactly what Potawatomi people do. Rather, that knowledge might better help me navigate land stewardship through my own community’s practices and worldviews. Knowledge, then, is cumulative, creative, and situational, passed down through generations since time immemorial. Sonic responsibility, as a listening practice of sonic stewardship that requires one to listen beyond the human, gifts listeners with both knowledge and the responsibility to be a better relation to our human and more/other-than-human kin. As I make sense of the network of kinship that Native hip hop resides in, statements and arguments about Native hip hop as a whole are not meant to erase or conflate knowledge, teachings, and experiences from Nations. Rather, these statements draw on the inter/intratribal coalition-building and the Black/Native solidarity that Native hip hop provides in order to look towards futurity.

¹¹ Sabzalian, Leilani. “Curricular Standpoints and Native Feminist Theories: Why Native Feminist Theories Should Matter to Curriculum Studies.” *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2018, pp. 359–382, p. 372.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 373

Futurity itself lies in the sensitive and intentional balance between bringing the past forward and building anew. Historically, assuming that other cultures never influenced Nations' cosmologies is to ignore the vast systems of connection and trade networks that existed before colonization. While their exact origins are unknown, throughout time the Otomí People made central México their home and have historically been a sedentary People. In the late 1200s and the first few decades of the 1300s, the Mexica People migrated to central México, building Tenochtitlan, now Ciudad de México. This migration led to many confrontations between the Mexica and the Otomí. Although the specifics are not agreed upon, many Otomí People joined the Mexica, while others refused to do so. The Mexica created a warrior class called the Otomí and integrated much of the Otomí knowledge of the skies.¹³ The Mexica drew on information from many cultures under their empire, but for my example, it is important to note that they adopted much of the Otomí lunar calendar and their mathematical system, weaving them into their own cosmologies.¹⁴

I share this history of my own People to say that many Nations have shared aspects of their cosmologies, such as the story of the Three Sisters across the Americas.¹⁵ Native hip hop then shares these cosmologies. Black and Saginaw Chippewa historian Kyle T. Mays contends that "surely prior to European colonization our ancestors learned from other Indigenous communities that informed how they viewed themselves in relation to others and land."¹⁶ As a relation, Native hip hop listens. When it passes on knowledge, it reflects all of Native hip hop's conversations with those across disparate Nations, as well as the direct

¹³ Wright-Carr, David Charles. "The Three Souls of the Otomi." *Acta Classica*, vol. 53, 2017, pp. 179–195.

¹⁴ Patrick-Encina, Dämixi Geraldine. "El Calendario Hñähñu: Un Análisis Epistémico y Semántico Para Establecer su Estructura." *Ra Ximhai*, vol. 7, núm. 1, 2011, pp. 41–50.

¹⁵ The Three Sisters is a story about corn, beans, and squash that exists in many different iterations across Turtle Island.

¹⁶ Mays, Kyle T. "Can We Live – And Be Modern?: Decolonization, Indigenous Modernity, and Hip Hop." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2015.

worldview of the one rapping. Both things can be true. Native hip hop itself, as a more/other-than-human kin, holds knowledge from thousands of Nations, including recent—within the spectrum of relations dating back to time immemorial—solidarity with Black and Brown folks. It is also Nation- and land-based. The nuance of these expansive histories guides my thinking as I process the Native hip hop artists, their music, and the events they organize as tools of futurity.

“Indigenous” and Native as Identity

In 2022, I virtually attended the National Indigenous Identity Forum, a symposium hosted by the First Nations University of Canada that brought together Canadian Native scholars such as Kim TallBear, Jacqueline Ottmann, Niigaanwewidam Sinclair, and Chris Andersen.¹⁷ Peguis lawyer and activist Murray Sinclair, who was the chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, gave the opening remarks. In his talk, “Framing Why We Must Move Beyond Self-Identification in Institutions,” he aligned with the rest of the forum, which addressed the meaning of “identity” and how it has become complicated by the continued impacts of Pretendians, DNA ancestry tests, and other easily accessible paths towards self-identification that omit kinship and relations.¹⁸ Following these

¹⁷ National Indigenous Identity Forum. “Final Report - March 2022.” <https://www.fnuniv.ca/about-us/niusla/national-indigenous-identity-forum-2022/>.

¹⁸ Pretendian is a term to signify someone who is pretending to be an “Indian.” People have been doing this for a very long time. The most common occurrence is the “Cherokee grandmother” myth, but many white people have claimed many communities without real familial ties. Additionally, academia has specifically been a location where a number of white scholars have used an “Indian” identity to further their career. One example of this is scholar Andrea Smith who had a significant impact on Native feminist scholarship. She claimed she was Cherokee and refused to change her story when she was called out by Cherokee community members and genealogists. Furthermore, when she did not receive tenure at the University of Michigan, she claimed it was because they did not believe she was Cherokee and that women of color are less likely to receive tenure. For a far from exhaustive list that is missing many such as Winona LaDuke, one can visit this website at: <https://pretendians.com/>.

conversations at the forum, I align with the idea that “Indigenous” as an identity lacks specificity and relations to community. Furthermore, identity, rooted in the self, can be created and recreated without relations to others. Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kimberly TallBear writes that “identity...does not necessarily imply ongoing relating.”¹⁹

At the 2022 forum, she argued that

I’ve become convinced that the term “Indigenous” is also a big problem [in conjunction with “identity”]. It’s enabling vague, distant, contorted ancestral or lineal descent claims (alleged or actual) to un-named or mis-named ancestors. “Indigenous” as it’s being promiscuously deployed, draws attention away from ideas of collectivity and belonging to First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and tribal communities.²⁰

While TallBear often deploys “Native” as her choice alternative, Dena’ina musicologist Jessica Bissett Perea uses “Indigeneity.” She writes that

The term “Indigenous” is generally understood as a static political category or identity, and as such engenders boundaries around who can be included or excluded from its purview. And since analyzing “identity” has come under considerable criticism within and beyond the academy, my shift throughout this book from Indigenous and toward Indigeneity is deliberate. Moreover, some Native American Peoples find “Indigenous” an imperfect global category that can unwittingly perform its own kind of erasure of local and tribal specificities.²¹

¹⁹ This is not to say that identity is not important in other contexts. Quote is from: TallBear, Kimberly. “Identity is a Poor Substitute for Relating: Genetic Ancestry, Critical Polyamory, Property, and Relations.” In Hokowhitu, Brendan, et al. *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*. Routledge, 2021.

²⁰ TallBear, Kimberly. “Kim TallBear Comments on Indigenous Citizenship in the Academy, 1 Year Later.” *Second National Indigenous Citizenship Forum*, First Nations University of Canada (presented on March 21, 2022), published on September 1, 2023, retrieved from: https://kimtallbear.substack.com/p/kim-tallbear-comments-on-indigenous#_edn1.

²¹ Perea, Jessica Bissett. *Sound Relations: Native Ways of Doing Music History in Alaska*. Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 25.

I agree with both TallBear and Perea, and deploy both Native and Indigeneity when talking about people and their relations. As such, I name scholars and rappers alike for their relations, not as a broader “Indigenous” identifier.

Throughout this dissertation, I honor the language people use in their day-to-day lives—both academic and community-based—that has been historicized and theorized. Terms like “Indigenous futurism” already circulate and have been central to significant theorization, conversation, and scholarship. The history and widespread popular use of terms that utilize “Indigenous” take precedence over my theoretical attachment to Native as a more appropriate term. Geographies also guide which terms I use. The boundaries between the deployment of “Indigenous” and “Native” play out differently in Latin America, and specifically México, for this dissertation. The early 20th-century project of *mestizaje*, as delineated by José Vasconcelos, was the precursor to millions of “Mexicans” (and Latin Americans more broadly) being detribalized and disconnected from their ancestors. There have been movements to reclaim these roots, such as the Chicano Movement, that center on Aztlán and pan-Aztec mythology as a means towards reclamation. This reclamation has also been reflected in Chicano rap, such as the 90s group Aztlán Underground's 1994 track “Indígena,” which features *danza Azteca* (Aztec dancers).²² More recent movements have used the term “indígena,” which corresponds to the broader term “Indigenous” to describe an identity that is not *mestizaje*. “Sangre indígena” [Indigenous blood], for example, is often used as a call to resist the settler project of *mestizaje* and honor one’s Indigeneity. For example, Native hip hop duo Kozmik Force released a track in 2019 called “Lo Nuestro Nunca Muere” [What We Have Never Dies], where their hook is “sangre indígena en mis

²² Aztlán Underground. “Aztlán Underground - Indígena (Official Video).” *YouTube*, May 3, 2021. <https://youtu.be/DZTmWj2pQJE?si=ZfuNV2PcPu8fFrpM>.

venas” [Indigenous blood in my veins].²³ Alternatively, those who do know their ancestral roots often use “pueblos originarios” [original peoples], which is more akin to “Native”—in its reference to original inhabitants and their specific relations.

In the U.S. and Canada—and the broader diaspora of Latin American Natives in English-speaking countries—“Indigenous” is commonly used to identify with detribalized Latin American Native roots. Moving away from Latino/a/x and reclaiming “Indigenous” does important on-the-ground work to build coalitions and socio-political work on government documents such as the census. In a dramatic shift, whereas the 2010 census recorded a self-reported 5.2 million Native people, the 2020 census recorded 9.7 million.²⁴ While several factors might explain this 86.5% increase, one identifiable reason is that more Latin Americans self-identified as Native.²⁵ Despite the socio-political power it affords detribalized Latin American Natives to identify with “Indigenous” against the racial construction of mestizaje, there still exists a lack of direct kinship to communities and ancestral lineages. In other words, some utilizations of the term “Indigenous” function, as TallBear argues, as “distant, contorted ancestral or lineal descent claims (alleged or actual) to un-named or mis-named ancestors.”²⁶ Conversations around Latin American Indigeneity are nuanced and require careful navigation of kinship/relations, as well as of claims stemming from a rejection of mestizaje and the colonial project of detribalization. As a reflection of these conversations, then, I use Native, Indigeneity, and Indígena, while always forefronting people’s direct relations.

²³ Kozmik Force. “Kozmik Force - “Lo Nuestro Nunca Muere” (Prod. Zapata The Ghost).” *YouTube*. October 4, 2019. <https://youtu.be/xHsGXoM7JU?si=STOljIud0lOkOcAf>.

²⁴ Retrieved from:

<https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/2020-census-native-population-increased-by-86-5-percent>

²⁵ Other factors include the rejection of blood quantum, the inclusion of Afr-Natives, Pretendians, and DNA tests.

²⁶ TallBear, 2023

Receiving Contradictions

While Native hip hop does embody the many contradictions that I lay out in this dissertation—urban vs rural, connected vs disconnected, etc—it also holds many contradictions of those people in this dissertation and therefore reflects how we as listeners, attendees, and community members are supposed to receive these bundles. I first met Def-i in 2021 at the inaugural Vibes with the Tribes festival in Detroit’s Mexicantown. My partner and I attended not as fieldwork, but rather as we had just moved for her masters and were looking for community. The first half of the event was a traditional drumming and singing competition, as well as fancy dancing. The second half was all hip hop artists. At the time, this was its own contradiction to me. The day was beautiful in many ways, but after all the musical performances, we went up to Def-i at his merch table and asked him if we could buy his shirt. He unfortunately only had a 3X left, but he told me to reach out on Instagram and that he should ship me a smaller size when he got back to New Mexico. This lack of my shirt size unknowingly was what sparked my relationship with Def-i, building into conversations and our own form of kinship.

The contradictions of Def-i also lie in his entire being. His mom has a PhD and is an educational beacon in her community. This inherently gives him educational access and privilege just by having such an educated parent. While this does impact the way in which he moves through the world daily including his speech and the way he thinks about the world, it also impacts the ways in which he is able to obtain opportunities. He’s strongly connected to multiple professors of the University of Mexico, not necessarily just because professors ask him to be a part of events, but also just because he is genuinely friends with

these folks. His familial background also informs the ways in which he has knowledge of the academic system, and specifically for his work, the knowledge of grants and grant writing. For example, his School of Hip Hop Tour is grant funded and he is able to pay all his team for the incredible work that they do. This is still seemingly a contradiction, that he can occupy multiple spaces and worlds at once. Then there is the global space that is his work with Next Level Hip Hop Diplomacy (curated by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill scholar Mark Katz). He gets to travel the world representing hip hop culture and do cultural exchanges. He even got to do an opening cypher for the 2024 Paris Olympics as it was the first year breaking was being included. All these parts of him are truly contradictory in ways which make him human. He uses multiple systems and can navigate disparate spaces in order to do the work that he does, even when the national system is against his community.

Although not quite at the fore in this project specifically, the way in which we receive hip hop bundles as listeners is equally full of contradictions. If we are to take the bundles of the folks in this dissertation, they are informed by the life experiences of each of them. To listen to a song of Def-i's is to understand the full spectrum of his very being. To receive one of these bundles functions differently when we are the listener, the community member, the breaker, the friend, or the family member. I argue that to receive a bundle is to be gifted the responsibility of kinship. If capitalism cannot be a part of sovereignty, then the cypher offers an alternative that is rooted in what I will explain as the gift economy. Beyond the gift economy, the cypher offers a different kind of economy that bypasses many forms of production as we know it (tickets, venues, etc). Here, we receive. In music we might call it listening—which I will talk about in length—but listening is receiving knowledge. While this dissertation talks about the music makers, new iterations will weave in reception.

On Native Futures

My relationship with Native hip hop is just that, a relationship. I listen to it. I talk to it. I believe in it. No one aspect of life can dismantle forced settler containments, but Native hip hop tries. For example, ICE raids continue to destroy communities and murder people on the street. During a raid in Minneapolis in early January 2026, ICE detained four Oglala Lakota members, three of whom were held at Fort Snelling, the same location where 1,700 Natives were herded in a concentration camp following the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Just a few days after this incident, on January 18, 2026, Oglala Lakota hip hop artist Nataanii Means posted a video on Instagram that sampled a news report about it. What followed was a short music video that placed deportation in a broader lineage of relocation. Means ended his verse by asking, “How can you ignore it when it’s happening on your screens?”²⁷

As U.S. President Donald Trump continues to try to buy—or invade—Greenland, a march was organized in the capital, Nuuk, on January 17, 2026. Kalaallit hip hop artist Tarrak spoke and led a chant of “Greenland is not for sale!” followed by a performance in which he exclusively rapped in Kalaallisut. The Otomí community is also always defending its territories from urban expansion and extractive industries. There is a phrase in Hñähñu that goes “ma haihu ha ma nguhu hindi pa, sehe di su [our lands and our homes are not for sale, they are to be protected],” and Otomí women are always at the forefront of organizing efforts. The MMIWG2S crisis continues to rise, and Native women are murdered ten times more than the national average in the United States, comparable to rates in Canada and

²⁷ nataanii_means. “This isn’t anything new, AmeriKKKa was born in lies, deceit, genocide and founded by slave owners.” January 18, 2026. https://www.instagram.com/nataanii_means/reel/DTqzuBwkj-I/.

México.²⁸ The Transwestern Pipeline Company LLC is awaiting approval for its WT-0 Compressor Station Project, which would be directly next to the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico, and the Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Company is awaiting approval for its Southeast Supply Enhancement Project, which would go through Southeast Alaska and directly harm communities such as the Tlingit People by contaminating their water sources.

These are only a few examples of the current threats against Native communities, and it is overwhelming to keep up and contend with them. Through it all, however, Native hip hop remains, guided by Native feminist relationality. It is always organizing and tapping into its networks of kinship. It is always building Native futures. I am just one voice, but after listening to and learning from Native hip hop, I hope to tell its story. Jāmadi juāda, thank you, relatives, and so, ga futi hü [we will begin].

²⁸ Eagan, Madison. "Indigenous Women: The Invisible Victims of Femicide in Mexico." *Harvard International Review*, 2020, retrieved from: <https://hir.harvard.edu/indigenous-women-victims-of-femicide-in-mexico/>.

Introduction: Grand Entry

How Native Hip Hop Came to Be

In the village of Ndathi [Celaya, Guanajuato], there once was a great storm. The People sought shelter, traveling the four directions in search of higher ground. As the storm got worse, the four travelers, who were the rock painter, the hand drummer, the dancer, and the storyteller, got lost. Each would come to embody one of the four elements of Native hip hop. They wandered through the land, attempting to get back home, but the storm was so bad that they could not tell which way they were going. The storm finally subsided, but the four travellers were separated and alone. One day, a 'banjua [rabbit] appeared to them and gave them each instruction. To the rock painter it said, "You must travel south, documenting your travels as you go. When you see the horizon of xät'a [cactus], you will know you are close." To the hand drummer it said, "You must travel north, beating the drum to the pulse of your heartbeat as you go. When you see the horizon of dethä [corn], you will know you are close." To the dancer it said, you must travel west, dancing through the valley and over the mountains. When you see the horizon of bindoju [pinto beans], you will know you are close." Finally, to the storyteller it said, "You must travel east, speaking to all your relations along the way and learning from them. When you see the horizon of mu [squash], you will know you are close." And so, the travelers set off under the light from the hyadi [sun]. As night fell, the zänä [moon] rose and they all took shelter. In all their dreams, the 'banjua visited them, protecting them and urging them to continue their journey. As the zänä arched its way into the sky after the second day, the 'banjua once again visited their dreams, this time showing them an image of the four of them facing each other from the direction in which they travelled. Halfway through the third day, the drummer—who was steadiest in

their travels to the beat of the drum—stopped as they saw the horizon. “Dethä,” they sang out! “I must be close.” They kept walking and soon found themselves in the Ndathi village center. The dancer was next, whose stomps sometimes were in the same place, slowing their progress. “Bindoju,” they sang out! “I must be close.” They danced through the bindoju field and soon were dancing in the village center to the drummer’s beat. After hearing stories from all their relations throughout their travels, the storyteller too finally came to the field. “Mu,” they sang out! “I must be close.” As they crossed the mu field, they heard the beat of the drum, and soon they too were in the village center, telling the stories of the land and all its relations to the beat of the drum while the dancer stomped the ground. The rock painter had the slowest journey of them all, observing the world around them and interpreting it on the rocks. But at last, they too reached the field. “Xät’a,” they sang out! “I must be close.” As they stepped through the field to the beat of the drum, they could hear the storyteller speak, and soon they also saw the dancer. All four of them were facing each other just as the ‘banjua had shown them, the rock painter etching the moment of return to Ndathi. People began to circle around in celebration of the return of their relatives, and a cypher was born—the four elements of hip hop travelling from the four sacred directions through the four sacred fields. This is how Native hip hop came to be.

* * *

This story that I just told is not a retelling. Rather, it is my own creation, drawing on many aspects of my community and the Native hip hop community. When creation stories are told, a story weaver might end with, “and this is how the sun came to be.” While this may seem like a universalizing statement about the sun, it draws on the cosmology of the story weaver’s Nation. For the Otomí People, such as the idea that the world went into

darkness (in this story, a storm), draws on the time when Zithu, the evil one, ran the world. I created this story to tell my own connection to Native hip hop, not anyone else's from any other Nation. Additionally, the content holds meaning. Ndathi [Celaya, Guanajuato] is where my abuela was born, and so this detail grounds the story in my own family's lineage. The four directions and four foods hold meaning to the Otomí and for many other Peoples. These meanings appear as cosmologies that center the sky (East, West, North, South) and variations of stories such as the Three Sisters (a story of corn, beans, and squash). Additionally, in the 1970s, Cree photographer Ernie Paniccioli made a comparison between the artist, drummer, dancer, and storyteller and the four elements of hip hop.

Finally, this story builds on and reflects upon my ethnographic experiences across Turtle Island. As an ethnomusicologist, I tell a creation story about how Native hip hop music came to be through a network of kinship that, within academia, can be viewed as socio-cultural and historical. These pieces of knowledge are what inform this creation story, and I tell it to further my belief that Native hip hop is woven into so many other facets of Native life. There are many creation stories of Native hip hop that derive from each Nation, and I tell this one to share my own relationship to this music.

This dissertation is an ethnography of Native hip hop music and its ecosystems during the summers of 2024 and 2025. I traveled and connected with folks in New York City, Detroit, Albuquerque, Oakland, Anchorage, and Nuuk in Greenland. This on-the-ground ethnography allowed me to attend festivals, performances, and workshops. It also allowed me to have conversations over lunch and listening sessions over coffee. Alternatively, I also engaged in digital ethnography through YouTube, Instagram, and other social media outlets. Through these two types of ethnography, I was able to gain an understanding of

Native hip hop that would not have been possible without both of these ethnographic elements. While Native hip hop ecosystems are built through gatherings, they are also advanced through digital gatherings that connect folks from disparate geographic locations.

Recently, scholars have argued that Native hip hop remaps settler views of the “traditional” Native (Mays 2018). Scholars like Mays contend with the history of Native music scholars such as Frederick Russell Burton (1909), Francis Densmore (1926), George Herzog (1949), and Bruno Nettl (1954) who portrayed Natives as “primitive” or have images of Natives in headdresses. There was then an overall shift, with scholars such as Nettl (1961), Louis W. Ballard (1970), and David P. McAllester (1981) discussing what it would mean to teach the traditional music of Native communities in classrooms and how to respectfully engage with traits such as polyphony. While this was an important move in how ethnomusicologists discussed Native music, it still focused on the past. In these two decades between Nettl 1961 and McAllester 1981, however, jazz saxophonist Jim Pepper released *Pepper’s Pow Wow* in 1971, and the famous Native rock band Redbone released “Come and Get Your Love” in 1974. Native music, even fifty years ago, has always balanced the modern and the traditional, even if scholarship has not. Finally, the last thirty years have seen an important shift to many Native people becoming scholars themselves, such as Heidi Aklaseaq Senungetuk (2017), Dawn Avery (2012), Jessica Bissett Perea (2021), Viki Eagle (2024 and 2025), Sunaina Keonaona Kale (2024), Renata Yazzie (2025), Dylan Robinson (2020), and Trevor Reed (2019 and 2021). Through a lived experience specific to their Nation/Tribe, these scholars analyze and discuss music from a perspective of kinship and relationality—one that is not stuck in the past but balances the past, present, and future.

I place this dissertation within the lineage of Native music scholarship, arguing that Native hip hop is both ancient and a tool of futurity. In this introduction, I first theorize what I call Native hip hop bundles, gifts of responsibility that pass knowledge through each track. I then argue that each track not only gifts knowledge to the listener but also requires sonic responsibility, a term I define as actively taking that knowledge and bringing it back to one's community. Finally, I address both the Native technosphere and the process of sampling/looping. I posit that the technology used to create beats is not a new way of looping, but rather draws on ancient technologies of knowing/doing, such as shapeshifting and tracking.

My first chapter builds on this framing to trace Black/Native solidarity from early educational institutions through the founding of hip hop. I then share an ethnography from my time in Albuquerque that highlights how Natives and Black folks are building futures through hip hop. In my second chapter, I theorize a Native hip hop pedagogy that resists the settler curriculum I discussed in chapter one. Here, I share my ethnographic experiences in Detroit, Oakland, New York City, and Albuquerque to show how these pedagogies are implemented on the ground. The second half of this chapter examines digital ethnography that addresses Native language acquisition through hip hop, and Native hip hop as a pedagogical tool for language learning. My third chapter builds towards a Native hip hop ecology, one that sounds the land and all its relations. Through digital ethnography of artists from México and on-the-ground ethnography in Albuquerque, I explore how Native hip hop artists build ecological futures. In my fourth and final chapter, I contend that there is currently a "Sound Back" movement that Native hip hop is at the forefront of, calling for the rematriation and sovereignty of Native sound. Drawing on my ethnographic research in

Nuuk, Anchorage, and Albuquerque, I share how Native hip hop artists are remapping settler geographic containments by taking Sound Back. Finally, my conclusion turns to Native hip hop joy. Native hip hop pedagogies of joy teach that joy resides in all of Native hip hop's elements. Through all of these chapters, however, the way in which Native hip hop builds Black/Native solidarity, Native hip hop pedagogies, Native hip hop ecologies, and Sound Back is by passing Native hip hop bundles.

Native Hip Hop Bundles

This section puts forth that Native hip hop, as its own relation, gifts Native hip hop bundles, passing knowledge and responsibility to the listener through each track. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that Native hip hop should not be reduced to a musical form whose primary value lies in activism, protest, or any other calls for socio-political change.

Approaches that treat hip hop as an instrument for these movements—suggesting that socio-political art makes people act—risk imagining the people in this dissertation solely as serving movements. Instead, they are community members, activists, and artists. These are complex subjects whose musical practices emerge from everyday life, and their work also serves their community and larger political movements. I also depart from frameworks that treat Native art exclusively as reflective of socio-political landscapes or as organized solely around resistance. Instead, I draw on Kanaka Maoli mixed-race ethnomusicologist Sunaina Keonaona Kale's theorization of insistence as an alternative analytic. Kale describes insistence as

dense, simultaneous, and contradictory Indigeneity. It encompasses everyday ways of being that do not rely on reacting against colonialism. They can be resistant, but account for

the reality that Indigenous people are deeply entangled in colonial structures. Insistence privileges self-determination; it is simply what Indigenous people do, are, and want to be. Insistence also complicates the ways that academics typically relate resistance to Indigenous identity.¹

This emphasis on density parallels Chris Anderson's theorization of "density of our Indigenous being"² and with Dena'ina ethnomusicologist Jessica Bissett Perea's call to "liste[n] to and for the expansive complexities of Indigeneity via a density of Native music and sound."³ Taken together, these theories allow me to approach Native hip hop not as a single politics of resistance that is defined by the fight against colonization, but instead as a bundle of knowledges and histories that inform kinships and relational ways of living.

Building on Kale, Anderson, and Perea, I understand insistence and density to point to the understanding that Indigeneity is not singularly situated as resistance to settlers. Instead, Indigeneity extends well before and beyond the time of settler colonialism and, crucially, encompasses everyday practices and creative uses of inherited knowledge. To think of Native hip hop in these terms, then, is to define Native music-making as a reflection of colonization *and* resistance, of large political movements *and* the mundane, and of trauma *and* joy. In other words, to conceive of Native hip hop solely as resistance erases the relational ways of living that are inherent in Native cosmologies, worldviews, and ways of life. Instead, being a community member by definition requires one to acknowledge one's relations and how one moves through the land in which they inhabit. Native hip hop, then,

¹ Kale, Sunaina Keonaona. "'To All My Maka'Ā'inana': Reggae, Food Sovereignty, and Indigenous Insistence in Hawai'i." *American Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2024, pp. 441–463, p. 452.

² Andersen, Chris. "Critical Indigenous Studies: From Difference to Density," *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2009, p. 81.

³ Perea, Jessica Bissett. *Sound Relations: Native Ways of Doing Music History in Alaska*. Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 8.

is just another part of the ecology of relations. Thinking about Native hip hop as its own relation shifts our thinking away from common analyses of art as a tool for producing change or a reflection of a landscape. Not only does it shift our analysis, but Native hip hop is a shapeshifter itself that opens portals for intergenerational dialogue and brings ancestral knowledge forward. Native hip hop is an ancestor. Native hip hop is a land defender. Native hip hop is a water protector. It is a medicine person. It is an auntie, a cousin, an oak tree, a cactus, a buffalo, and a hummingbird. Art as a tool or reflection asks what art can do for the human. Native hip hop, however, as its own relation, decenters the human and forefronts relational ways of being, knowing, and listening. Drawing on kinship between humans and more/other-than-humans alike, Native hip hop holds knowledge from before colonization as well as from our future relatives. At its core, Native hip hop is a relative that passes knowledge across space and time.

Hip hop knowledge is passed in bundles, a specific kind of gift central to many Native practices. Bundles, in their many forms, have existed across Native communities since time immemorial. In many Nations, there are often ceremonial, sacred, and spiritual ties. In a physical sense, bundles are items wrapped in cloth, a pouch, a basket, or a box. The most common physical bundle is the medicine bundle, dating back to when medicine people carried their goods as they traveled and served their community. Bundles can be carried by individuals or by communities, and the sacred or protective powers can often be transferred when gifted to another.

Native hip hop bundles, therefore, are all of these beings and knowledges wrapped in a beat, requiring sonic relationality and responsibility from the listener. Unlike Western forms of music consumption, hip hop bundles gift responsibility to all of Native hip hop's

relations. This knowledge, wrapped/rapped by the artist, is land-based, reflecting kinship with our more/other-than-human relations. Already built on sampling and citational practices that speak across generations, the sonic past, present, and future of any given beat tightly wrap each knowledge bundle. As one unwraps the sonic cloth, tightly woven to hold the track, ancestors and future generations alike call upon the listener for responsibility. It necessitates a careful, slow unraveling of the bundle that is a gifted responsibility into the relational practice of reworlding that shifts between temporal and spatial sensibilities.⁴ Not only are these bundles present within a community, but also between communities and listeners. Within the local, Native hip hop bundles represent relationality to the land and more/other-than-human kin of the artist's Nation. On a larger scale, coalition-building—expanding, growing, and renewing relations—also represents relationality between Peoples through the continued shared impacts of and responses to colonization. As reworlding attends to both temporal and spatial elements, it requires networks of kinship that exceed the current moment or a centralized geographic location.

Intergenerational conversations, time travel, and shapeshifting all position Native hip hop bundles to require sonic responsibility from their listeners. While there are many Black and Native scholars of futurism (Chambliss 2024; Dillon 2012; Eshun 1998; Recollet 2019; Tate 2020; Weheliye 2002; Womack 2013), these ideas are ancient and not rooted in academic thought. Through Native cosmologies, storytelling practices, mythologies, and other ancestral ways of communication, practicing futurity is land and community-based. Opening a portal to have intergenerational conversations is not science fiction. Through ceremony, visions, and dreams, ancestors and future generations have always appeared in

⁴ This sentence contains the idea of unraveling which comes from a conversation I had with Plains Cree scholar Kai Recollet on April 24, 2025.

these open portals, sharing bundles of knowledge. These portals also allow for time travel not only when spirits, more/other-than-human relations, and relatives visit, but also when one visits them in their own time and space. Portals are also places where shapeshifting occurs, defying settler conceptions of space and time as linear and measurable. As Nations explain the world they inhabit, shapeshifters are often critical to their understanding.

Shapeshifters appear in creation stories and mythologies, and my own Nation's creation story of the corn tells of a child who turned into the sun. They can sometimes appear as beings such as the Trickster, but they can also serve the Nation's needs, like getting medicine from one place to another quickly, or animals shapeshifting from one to another during hunts. Because all of this knowledge is wrapped in beats that hold intergenerational conversations, time travel, and shapeshifting, Native hip hop bundles gift responsibility and require the listener to engage in all of these conversations, histories, and practices to better move through the world with relationality. Just like hip hop artists are community members first, and Native hip hop is just one part of Native life, Native hip hop bundles remind the listener that the same is true for them. The listener is not just a listener of hip hop; they are a community member first. The listener must also shapeshift as they navigate how to move through the world and how to act on the responsibility that Native hip hop has gifted them. These complex networks of kinship and reciprocity define the relationality of bundles, of building/renewing relations, and of reworlding. It is what makes Native hip hop a relation and something that has the very capacity to carry a bundle. Within oral traditions/storytelling, cosmologies, and mythologies, it is what makes hip hop ancient and able to be tracked through Native sonic lineages.

The tracks themselves—beyond being part of an artistic project—draw on ancient ways of tracking. As one follows any path, tracking is critical for encounters, signs, and the very process of being gifted knowledge.⁵ Tracking requires observation and a deep understanding of all our relations, while also letting the physical and spirit worlds reveal what needs to be revealed, only once one is ready for the responsibility that knowledge requires. Native hip hop bundles provide tracks that require the listener to chart their own path through knowledge and responsibility, wrapped in each sonic cloth that are my chapters.

Bundle of Responsibility

In a video produced by the Institute of Indigenous Learning at Fanshawe College, Ojibwe and Oneida traditional healer Liz Akiwenzie (Nisitange Kwe) describes the many types of bundles that have existed within Native communities in order to provide aid and build community. I begin with her broader definition of a bundle.

A bundle is what we carry our sacred medicines in and that we can, uh, use those medicines whenever it is that we need to. And a bundle is created or given to you, you know? And it's something that we learned from the time that we arrived on this Earth is about our medicines because we are a medicine. We need to feed our medicines so a physical bundle is, uh, could be wrapped in cloth, it could be in a basket, could be in a box, it could be in some kind of, um, material that somebody has made.⁶

Gifting responsibility is a theme throughout the different types of bundles that Akiwenzie describes. Specifically, the bundle's components demand responsibility from the carriers

⁵ Cajete, Gregory. *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Kivaki Press, 1994, p. 54.

⁶ Fanshawe Institute of Indigenous Learning. "The Sitdown: What is a Bundle?" *YouTube*. January 22, 2024. <https://youtu.be/k0hW42cnZHY?si=AGyFnwVokyyOY13x>.

and receivers of the bundle and these responsibilities—such as care and humility—are understood as gifts.

The gift aspect of bundles reflects rigid boundaries between settler mindsets and Native worldviews. Settler views of gifts end in ownership, or at least in a transfer of ownership. One person owns an object—because it was gifted or bought—and then, after being gifted, that object has a new owner. Potawatomi botanist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer explains that

From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the “gift” is deemed to be “free” because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a “bundle of rights,” whereas in a gift economy property has a “bundle of responsibilities” attached.⁷

In opposition to gifts as free and the transfer of ownership, viewing gifts as “bundles of responsibilities” represents a relational way of living. Anything we are gifted or take for ourselves from the land bestows responsibility and must be given back in various ways through reciprocity and the planting of future seeds.

While future seeds may be understood as a metaphor for potentiality or good things to come, many communities also carry physical seeds in their bundles. Seeds are featured prominently in many Native stories across Turtle Island and beyond. Kimmerer, for example, tells the story of the Three Sisters, a story told in many forms across the U.S., Canada, and México.

⁷ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. First edition. Milkweed Editions, 2013, p. 28.

Native people speak of this gardening style as the Three Sisters. There are many stories of how they came to be, but they all share the understanding of these plants as women, sisters. Some stories tell of a long winter when the people were dropping from hunger. Three beautiful women came to their dwellings on a snowy night. One was a tall woman dressed all in yellow, with long flowing hair. The second wore green, and the third was robed in orange. The three came inside to shelter by the fire. Food was scarce but the visiting strangers were fed generously, sharing in the little that the people had left. In gratitude for their generosity, the three sisters revealed their true identities—corn, beans, and squash—and gave themselves to the people in a bundle of seeds so that they might never go hungry again.⁸

My own community, the Otomí, has a creation story of the seeds that formed the corn. Even further south of México, seeds are kept in bundles to preserve food sovereignty and ways of life. Maya daykeepers have seed bundles called *tz'ite'*, which can be translated to coral bean seeds.⁹ The movement to fight the loss of seed diversity is taken up throughout Turtle Island and in Native communities further south. Through the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA), one of their initiatives is the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network. Their mission is to pass on and teach seed stewardship in order to “protect their seeds from patenting and bio-piracy.”¹⁰ They explain that across Turtle Island, there is “a growing inter-generational movement of Indigenous people proud to carry the message of the grand rematriation of seeds and foods back into our Indigenous communities.”¹¹

Seeds as bundles of responsibility bring us back to Kimmerer through the gift economy and

⁸ Kimmerer 2013, p. 131

⁹ This is from a conversation on February 28, 2025 with linguistic anthropologist Roberto Young who works with the Maya Kachikel community.

¹⁰ Retrieved from: <https://nativefoodalliance.org/our-programs-2/indigenous-seedkeepers-network/>.

¹¹ Ibid

reciprocity. While these examples of seeds are literal, they are also shapeshifters and can embody knowledge of all kinds. When one receives a seed, one is gifted immense responsibility to care for its growth. Kimmerer also connects seeds/bundles to Native futures. She explains that,

In the valleys below the hill, I see the people of the Seventh Fire walking toward the crossroads with all they have gathered. They carry in their bundles the precious seeds for a change of worldview. Not so they can return to some atavistic utopia, but to find the tools that allow us to walk into the future. So much has been forgotten, but it is not lost as long as the land endures and we cultivate people who have the humility and ability to listen and learn. And the people are not alone. All along the path, nonhuman people help. What knowledge the people have forgotten is remembered by the land.¹²

It is this bundle of responsibility that builds relationships. Starting here, in the most physical form of bundles, emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and relational ways of living. As a gift, knowledge keepers pass responsibility and have the confidence that the given set of relationships and kinship will always be honored.

Knowledge Keepers: Digital Survivance and the Passing of Bundles

Bundles, how they are passed, and what is passed have shifted modes of transference since the invention of the internet and the creation of digital landscapes. Physical bundles still exist and are critical to upholding ways of life. With the creation of the internet, however, this section traces shifts from the physical to the digital, describing a parallel shift from material seeds to seeding knowledge through digital gifting that our ancestors never thought possible. In doing so, planting seeds as a continued process of reworlding and

¹² Kimmerer 2013, p. 369

surviving through an apocalypse ensures Native futures by appropriating digital spaces.

Akiwenzie described many types of bundles, and while these still exist, the historical modes of transmission are being reconfigured as they pass through digital landscapes.

Additionally, new bundle types are being defined. There is recent scholarship on pedagogical bundles (Ariss & Stevens 2022), storytelling and oral tradition bundles (Courtland et al 2021), medicine bundles and how they have shifted to encompass giving rural Native youth access to mental health resources (Mihalicz 2020), and knowledge bundles that pass tools to navigate trauma within social work (Ryan-Schmidt 2020).

Knowledge as a bundle takes many forms. Plant medicine, cosmology, migratory patterns of animals, gastronomy, physical resources by way of flyers for community events, posts on social media, and so much more can constitute knowledge as a bundle. How this knowledge was—and often still is—transmitted is through language and oral tradition/storytelling. Native language not only passes these bundles on to future generations, but the language itself is a bundle. Native language is encoded with knowledge that oftentimes the process of translation renders invisible or changes the meaning.

While many Native languages are thriving and many others are currently being revitalized, the mass erasure of Native languages by settler education (such as teaching English in the U.S. and Spanish in a Latin American) is a well-known reality. Still, many Native scholars, community members, and hip hop artists acknowledge that the colonizer's language, too, can hold ancestral knowledge. Survival and building Native futures depend on both revitalizing ancient ways and imagining a future in which these ways thrive.

Building futures has often centered on survivance, which Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor theorized as a combination of “survival” and “resistance.”¹³ At its core, survivance thrives through the passing of knowledge bundles, not only of ancestral wisdom but also of how to survive and resist in both the now and an imagined future. Communications scholar Anna Haas extends Vizenor’s definition by arguing that digital survivance enables Native people to appropriate digital spaces to build community and fight for sovereignty.¹⁴ Media, film and journalism scholar Lynn Schofield Clark and Ho-Chunk historian Angel Hinzo expand upon Haas’ theorization of digital survivance and posit that

artifacts of digital survivance speak not only of contesting power, then, but of how the communities that create and circulate these artifacts make a claim to and speak from a moral center, thus displacing and decentering the claim of the normative, and even of how we define and understand “power” and “the center.”¹⁵

Digital survivance complicates settler control of and relationship to land by creating space for artifacts that exist in both the physical and digital worlds. The way these artifacts exist in multiple worlds draws on ancient ways of shapeshifting, in which kin of all kinds live across multiple worlds.

One common way in which bundles were passed from location to location, from People to People, was through shapeshifting. Not only do human kin and more/other-than-human kin travel between the human and spirit worlds, but they also

¹³ Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

¹⁴ Haas, Angela. “Toward a Decolonial Digital and Visual American Indian Rhetorics Pedagogy.” In L. King, R. Gubele, & J. R. Anderson (Eds.), *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2015, pp. 188–208.

¹⁵ Clark, Lynn Schofield, and Angel Hinzo. “Digital Survivance: Mediatization and the Sacred in the Tribal Digital Activism of the #NoDAPL Movement.” *Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 76–104, pp. 98–99.

shapeshift in order to serve their communities. K'ómoks First Nation scholar and artist Andy Everson states that,

My people believe in a time when our ancestors wore the clothes of animals. They could take off their animal skin and become human and put that skin back on and return to their animal form. Many of our crest figures harken back to this era of transformation. In the time before the flood, our ancestors could shapeshift into other creatures or objects.¹⁶

Natives continue to pass information that shapeshifts through the digital world. While technological advances have produced many things that travel faster than human feet, digital spaces enable a multi-spatial, multi-temporal sense of community-building that shares knowledge across Nations and throughout migration. Hip hop itself has long traveled through digital landscapes, reaching countries across the globe (Alim et al 2008; Gamble and Valverde 2021; Gamble 2024; Morgan 2016; Stokes 2019; Terkourafi 2010). As global hip hop has organized itself around many factors, ranging from addressing local political landscapes to reproducing caricatures of Blackness, Native hip hop in this dissertation explores avenues of land-ing through the planting of digital seeds. Native hip hop and the rappers themselves in this dissertation are futuristic.

Futuristic Ndns and Digital Bundles

On December 1, 2023, Anishinaabe hip hop artist SouFy released a new track titled “Futuristic Ndns,” featuring Diné hip hop artist Def-i. Def-i’s verse on the track brings up ideas around shapeshifting and the passing of bundles:

Not to mention our lineage passed down from blood connections
my cousin was a menace from the bloody rezes

¹⁶ Everson, Andy. “Shapeshifter.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2015, p. 1.

spaceship, Mother Earth, travel through dimensions
shapeshift, four moons spinning two directions
yo I'm comin' from the essence, ground under trenches
only found in tunnels, down in bunkers, under benches done in seconds
not that someone that sounds one dimension
my arrow double headed with the rugged cutting edges
hunter gathers and fisherman from New Mexico to Michigan
crystal finisher chiselin' signature initialin,' written with no pencil pen
envision in the rhythm with no limit, verses fitted within the pendulum.¹⁷

In a conversation I had with Def-i, he explained that

The "shapeshift" [line from his verse on "Futuristic Ndns"] kinda goes back to the old medicine ways, like before colonization... Before there were horses and cars, people had to travel long distances really quick overnight just to get medicine from one place to another. And it was practice to also look ahead so people can have actual scouts who can travel faster than the human feet can.¹⁸

While Def-i is drawing on ancient ways of shapeshifting and passing bundles, the track itself is about an imagined future and describes their ethos as "Futuristic Ndns." As hip hop artists who use sampling and beat-making technology while posting their music to various platforms, they pass bundles through the digital world.

I draw on, then, Anishnaabekwe (Ojibwe/Potawatomi) education scholar Jennifer Wemigwans' theorization of "digital bundles," which describes the passing of various kinds of knowledge through technology. Wemigwans argues that digital bundles "can perpetuate Indigenous resurgence and counteract the impact of colonization, which continues to attack

¹⁷ SouFy313. "Futuristic Ndns." *YouTube*. December 1, 2023.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGK_J5V6AEs.

¹⁸ Def-i, personal communication, February 28, 2024

Indigenous communities through land appropriation.”¹⁹ Since the colonial encounter, settlers have continued to use tactics in order to decentralize Native knowledge and force disparate Native communities into confined spaces such as boarding schools and reservations. Through forced Christianity, language erasure, and biological warfare—“gifting” blankets covered in smallpox to Native communities—, settlers slowly put laws into place to ensure assimilation and Western ways of life by forcing many Natives to migrate from their ancestral homelands.

In 1879, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the first official Indian Boarding School in the U.S., was established in Carlisle, PA. Just in the U.S., there soon were over 500 Indian Boarding Schools, all with curriculum to erase Native culture from the youth. As the elders often held knowledge in their Nation’s tongues, knowledge and ways of life were erased across generations by targeting the youth. In Canada, there was also the 60s Scoop, a mass kidnapping of Native children from their families to be put into the welfare system. Backed by the Canadian Indian Act and the impact of Residential Schools, “[b]y the mid-1960s, the number of Indigenous children in the child welfare system in some provinces was over 50 times more than it had been in the beginning of the 1950s.”²⁰ While many of these children were kept in Canada, many were sent to the “United Kingdom, Germany, India, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Botswana, far away from their traditional lands.” Despite the UN Convention’s “Rights of a Child” treaty in 1989, the last Indian Residential School in Canada closed in 1996—the Lebret Residential School in Qu’Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan, which Muskowekwan and Cote rapper Drezus attended.

¹⁹ Wemigwans, Jennifer. *A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online*. University of Regina Press, 2018, p. 209.

²⁰ Baswan, Meera and Sena Yenilmez. “The Sixties Scoop.” *The Indigenous Foundation*. N.d. <https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/the-sixties-scoop>.

Kidnapping and language erasure are just two of many ways in which settlers decentralized and stopped the passing of knowledge intergenerationally and between Nations. These tools of colonization involved connections—or disconnections—with the land. Whether it was relocating Natives to new ecosystems, erasing their language that held ancestral knowledge specific to the land, or kidnapping youth, land domination gave settlers power over what knowledge was being disseminated and how. This history is why, then, passing digital bundles in order to further digital survivance is so powerful. Settlers cannot control the landscape of digital media as they once could with physical land because they cannot confine or herd people in the same way. Digital survivance defies settler geographies of colonization. Of course, “community guidelines” and AI sweeps can attempt to take down accounts and posts that pose threats to settler safety, but the digital landscape itself allows for Natives across geographical areas to connect and share knowledge in radical ways. The ability to instantly pass bundles is being explicitly acknowledged by prominent Native content creators and organizations on digital media platforms.

A non-profit organization called The Future Elders Collective, for example, posted on January 10th, 2025, stating that “for the first time in history, Indigenous People can speak to each other across so-called borders to discuss, in real time, issues that we collectively face.”²¹ One aspect of coalition-building across digital platforms is that communities can decenter settler curriculum through real-time conversations that were once impossible due to geographic distance. Responding to this history, wherein “whitestream knowledge has been centered for far too long,” Cree-Métis scholar Ionah Scully forwards a call to “shapeshift that power dynamic” through the “embrace [of] knowledges that have been

²¹ futureelderscollective. *Instagram*. January 10, 2025.
https://www.instagram.com/p/DEqNiVXT3ti/?img_index=1.

forced to the margins.”²² For the collaborators in this dissertation, digital bundles enable Native hip hop artists to sonically locate themselves within networks of sonic kinship. Through the conversations that Native hip hop has with disparate Nations across digital platforms, Native hip hop itself listens to its relations and acts as a knowledge keeper.

Digital spaces have shifted the way we think about knowledge keepers. Digital literacy is usually highest among youth who appropriate online spaces to meet the needs of their communities. Wemigwans writes that while elders have historically been seen as the “pinnacle” of ancestral ways of knowing, the evidence that youth are increasingly learning traditional knowledge and sharing it via digital platforms “indicates a cultural shift among our Knowledge Keepers.”²³ The shift, then, from on-the-ground knowledge keepers to digital knowledge keepers lies not only with who is passing this knowledge, but also with how it is being passed. Understandably, some elders are resistant to the idea that the internet is a suitable site for the passage of bundles. On this point, Wemigwans advocates acting with the same level of care one would in the human world. She continues by contending that it is critical to qualify online teachings as “digital bundles because they adhere to, embrace, and reflect Indigenous cultural protocols held by Elders and Knowledge Keepers.”²⁴ By doing so, we must continue to “mark digital bundles as respected Indigenous Knowledge sources vetted and supported by Indigenous communities.”²⁵ Digital bundles are an extension of passing medicine, sacred, spiritual, or any other kind of ancestral bundle. The practice and the level of care within relational reciprocity can be the same. The

²² Scully, Jonah. M. E. “Shapeshifting Power: Indigenous Teachings of Trickster Consciousness and Relational Accountability for Building Communities of Care.” *The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal*, vol. 4, 2021, pp 50–67, p 62

²³ Wemigwans 2018, p. 209

²⁴ Ibid, p. 226

²⁵ Ibid, p. 226

internet does not take anything away from the duties of knowledge keepers. Instead, the internet expands the ability to share information and adds responsibility due to its reach. It draws on shapeshifting practices in order to navigate and attempt to avoid the settler gaze. Most importantly, it decentralizes knowledge in light of settler extraction. I do not imply that knowledge passed this way is no longer tied to the land. The land, our living relations, and our more/other-than-human relations will always guide our practices. Rather, disseminating digital bundles allows for a different kind of survivance, one that makes new kin.

Kinship, relationality, and responsibility are central to my theorizing through bundles. Expanding upon Kale's previous divergence from resistance, I also move away from labeling the tracks in this dissertation as "protest" music. Just like my initial reasoning for deploying "Native" over "Indigenous," my understanding as a musician and consumer of music in our current moment is that protest often lacks kinship. That is not to say that kinship does not and cannot exist in protest music. However, we are in a period when performative activism is commonplace. Music superstars who are multi-millionaires can release protest music and then do nothing materially to aid in the on-the-ground movement. Calling Native hip hop in this dissertation "protest music" does not fully account for the networks of kinship it navigates. Unfortunately, protest music can often exist in a void. People listen and can applaud the message, but still can ultimately do nothing in their own lives. Instead, receiving a Native hip hop bundle that has gifted responsibility requires one to traverse these networks, listening, learning, and connecting with human and more/other-than-human kin. It demands relationality and does not let the listener be passive.

Native hip hop is one path forward that brings the on-the-ground and the digital together. Native hip hop is both performed and recorded. The balance between these two modes builds a vast Native sonic archive. While these processes are not exclusive to hip hop, how hip hop beatmaking, production, and especially looping are based in citational practices of sampling uniquely grow the archive. As a music built on intergenerational conversations, hip hop has always been documenting time travel, bringing old records into the present and future. We might best understand hip hop, its practices, aesthetics, and practitioners as participating in the creation and sharing of what Plains Cree scholar Kai Recollet calls “futurity bundles” as forms of “time-traveling devices.”²⁶ Native hip hop not only passes futurity bundles but is one itself as a time-traveling device.

Digital bundles equally embody futurity bundles in how they move and exist in a given space. As knowledge that is “adher[ing] to, embrac[ing], and reflect[ing] Indigenous cultural protocols,” bundles continue to connect with the land and the digital landscape.²⁷ Wemigwans further asserts that “[t]he construction of protective space on the Internet where aspects of Indigenous Knowledge can thrive can accomplish a powerful reassertion of what it means to be Indigenous.”²⁸ Native hip hop bundles that build towards Native futures—futurity bundles—radically reimagine survivance and what it means to be a knowledge keeper.

Relationships to other humans, to more/other-than-human kin, and to the land only grow due to the archive that Native hip hop curates, balancing the physical and digital worlds. Never before has documentation of Native life enabled community building and the

²⁶ Recollet 2019, pp. 92–93

²⁷ Wemigwans 2018, p. 226

²⁸ Ibid

real-time reflection of worldviews and relationships to the land. Documentation of pipeline protests, ICE raids, and so much more is shared in bundles far beyond the scope our ancestors ever imagined information would travel—even with shapeshifting. Images and videos of the harm being done to land defenders, water protectors, and community members spread more quickly than settlers can mobilize. While knowledge bundles encompass the sharing of harm and calls for help, they also disseminate beauty. They share plant medicine, creation stories, and language classes. They share the spirit, the love, and the hope. They share survivance and ways to radically build Native futures through good medicine.

Medicine bundles also share survivance and are now sometimes digital. In 2021, Apsáalooke rapper Supaman released an album called *Medicine Bundle*. After his release, he toured the album across the U.S., performing *Medicine Bundle* and, in real time, passing medicine bundles to those in attendance. As Native rappers perform, release music for streaming, upload music videos on YouTube, or lead workshops in the community, they engage in Native hip hop pedagogies. They do not have to be fully produced or even finished songs. They can be freestyles, battles, graffiti, or breaking. Understanding how music fits into the other pillars of hip hop culture is critical to how Native hip hop artists function not only within hip hop but within their culture more broadly.²⁹ Whether in person or through digital spaces, hip hop connects people across geographical locations and Nations. Whether through resharing songs on digital platforms, starting conversations in their own communities, or coalition-building across Nations, hip hop bundles radically

²⁹ Def-i, personal communication, February 28, 2024

reimagine how knowledge is shared through communities and music. As our relations and our responsibility grows, Kimmerer reminds us that

None of us can recognize every piece, let alone carry it all. We need each other, to take a song, a word, a story, a tool, a ceremony and put it in our bundles. Not for ourselves, but for the ones yet to be born, for all our relations. Collectively, we assemble from the wisdom of the past a vision for the future, a worldview shaped by mutual flourishing.³⁰

Sonic Responsibility and Sonic Stewardship

Scholars have previously argued that Native hip hop creates kinship. For example, literary studies scholar Sarah Kent contends that Native hip hop is not a series of individual performances. Rather, it represents kinship which “provides resurgent tension to the negative affectivity of shame and internalized hatred that proliferate from colonial systems,” ultimately “undermin[ing] colonial systems [to build] alternative futures.”³¹ My intervention lies in the kinds of kinship that can be fostered through interaction with Native hip hop as its own relation. This shift in modalities shapes how we listen to Native hip hop. Listening through the lens of human kinship, as Kent argues for, addresses how Natives build community across Nations and geographies. However, listening to Native hip hop as a relation decenters the human and expands our understanding of what can be passed, who is passing it, and how it is being passed.

Listening as a practice has also been interrogated by many scholars of Native music. At its core, Diné ethnomusicologist Renata Yazzie notes, “listening is kinship and kinship is

³⁰ Kimmerer 2013, p 371

³¹ Kent, Sarah. “I Got This AB Original Soul / I Got This AB Original Flow’: Frank Waln, the Postmasculindian, and Hip Hop as Survivance.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 30, no. 3–4, 2018, pp. 121–50, p. 144.

listening.”³² Through a relational way of living, we must listen to all our kin to move responsibly through the spaces we inhabit. There can be no kinship without listening and no listening without kinship, as our relationships depend on community. Individualism within capitalism drives the separation of these. Listening has also been theorized by xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) artist, curator, and writer Dylan Robinson, who argues that “decolonizing musical practice involves becoming no longer sure what LISTENING is.”³³ Following Yazzie, building kinship and honoring all our relations might require listening, but, as Robinson points out, naming it as such within a Western definition places it within a settler perspective of listening as a practice that points towards the ownership of knowledge. Listening for extraction centers a conquest of information (what Robinson labels “hungry listening”). Alternatively, “becoming no longer sure what listening is” centers reciprocity and responsibility to our kin through intergenerational conversations and the passing of knowledge. To build community is to listen without naming it as “listening.”

Building off this scholarship, I theorize sonic responsibility as weaving in and out of these definitions of listening practices. As a relation itself, listening to Native hip hop is not solely about listening to the artist. As part of a vast network of kinship not only through Native sonic lineages but also through hip hop that has built Black/Native solidarity, sonic responsibility requires one to listen beyond the human. As an ancient practice of storytelling, Native hip hop passes knowledge from human and more/other-than-human ancestors as well as future generations. Sonic responsibility is to take these bundles and

³² Yazzie, Renata. In Yamane, Maxwell (Chair), “Mapping Indigenous Lands and Water through Sound.” Roundtable conversation, *NAISA Annual Conference*, Oklahoma City, OK. June 27, 2025. https://convention2.allacademic.com/one/naisa/naisa25/index.php?cmd=Online+Program+View+Session&elected_session_id=2218128&PHPSESSID=ui92sj4nq031l02totgj05cit0.

³³ Robinson, Dylan. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2020, p. 47.

understand how one can use them to better live on the land and with their own community. Hopi lawyer and ethnomusicologist Trevor Reed argues that “Hopi actions through sound can be seen as authoritative because they tend to produce changes in human and non-human listeners and within environments throughout a given territory.”³⁴ While “actions through sound” implies it was the human kin who pushed these actions into place, sound itself is an authority because it is a relation, thus requiring listeners to adhere to the sonic responsibility that Native hip hop gifted them. As Reed said, the many processes of listening also affect “non-human listeners.” Native hip hop listens to more/other-than-human relations, and they listen back. For us to listen to Native hip hop is to listen to knowledge of this world and the spirit world that can be traced back to time immemorial.

Additionally, I draw on Perea who argues that, “[b]y listening closely to the density of Native musicking, one can hear sonifications of Native People’s observations, theories, critiques, and commentaries on their social, political, and economic worlds.”³⁵ Rappers are not the only ones encoding these sonifications. Native hip hop also provides a more/other-than-human’s observations and commentaries on the human world and on humans as relations to those around them. Listening to Native hip hop—and Native sound more broadly—as its own relation requires a far greater sonic responsibility than listening as extraction. Perea goes on to say that

listening to a range of archival sites (institutional, community-based, and more) and auralities (ways of hearing texts, images, audiovisual recordings, embodiments, and more)

³⁴ Reed, Trevor. “Sonic Sovereignty: Performing Hopi Authority in Öngtupqa.” *Journal of the Society for American Music*, vol. 13, 2019, pp. 508–530, p. 526.

³⁵ Perea 2021, pp. 10–11

offers a critical interventions to a presumed absence (read: silence) of Native Peoples over time.³⁶

The network of kinship has never been silent. More/other-than-human kin are always communicating, and through relational ways of living, we are always listening. The Native sonic archive goes back to time immemorial, and through the citational and looping practices that hip hop provides, Native hip hop artists are always listening.

Once sonic responsibility is given, one must take on the role of sonic stewardship, and it is critical to map how sonic stewardship draws on land stewardship. Palestinian education scholar and activist Razan Samara and Unangax' Native studies scholar Eve Tuck argue that stewardship "allows land back to refer not just to the relationships to the land that come back but the relations to community, gathering, space, and ceremony that can happen in relation to returned lands."³⁷ I also look to Nanticoke anthropologist Karelle Hall, who lays out a comprehensive definition of why Land Back is imperative for stewardship. She writes that Land Back is "much more than a statement; it is a speech act that is both a symbolic reminder of the violent history of the land we stand on and a legal call for its return."³⁸ Building on Samara, Tuck, and Hall, sonic responsibility enacts sonic stewardship through the bundles that Native hip hop passes. Sonic stewardship can take many forms. It can be founding Native record labels, putting on performances in settler spaces as well as Native spaces, or curating the lineage of Native sonic archives. As a relation, sonic stewardship of Native hip hop requires conversations with Native hip hop itself, listening to

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 8–9

³⁷ Samara, Razan and Eve Tuck. "'Sometimes the Land Comes Back': Palestinian Organizers Reflect on Indigenous-Led Land Rematriation in the Bay Area." *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2025, pp. 181–192, p. 187.

³⁸ Hall, Karelle. "Land Back: Indigenous Sovereignty as Care through Responsibility and Relationship." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 126, 2024, pp. 682–84, p. 683.

the stories it has to tell of its ancestors. Native hip hop passing bundles, gifting sonic responsibility, and requiring sonic stewardship are what make Native listening practices radical beyond settler conceptions of music. It is this relationship with our more/other-than-human kin that is needed to dismantle settler infrastructure and build Native futures, such as sounding the land. Land Back hip hop, which I theorize in chapter four, calls for Land Back and the end of extractive industries.

Black Snakes (2017)

Prolific the Rapper's 2017 track "Black Snakes" is an example of Land Back hip hop that sounds the land during the militarized construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The music video for "Black Snakes" fades from black to color, as Rosebud Sioux hip hop artist Prolific the Rapper stands on a snow-covered field with pine trees lined in the distance. As the snowflakes continue to fall and dart across the camera lens, he begins to speak.

With the stroke of a pen, Trump's trying to undo everything we've worked so hard for, but as Indigenous People, our existence is our resistance. We protect Mother Earth and the water because it's who we are and we have no other choice. I'm facing seven years in prison, yet I remain dedicated to peace and prayer. Pray with us.

The video cuts to images of the DAPL and the beat drops. Elders ride in on horses. Others set up temporary homes, while others still march in. Fancy dancers and drummers congregate and begin musical prayer. Cops flood the line and begin to shoot water through industrial hoses, harming water protectors, elders, and children. Other cops hide behind the barbed wire fence that law enforcement erected and fire mace at unarmed people.

Prolific begins to rap as the imagery continues: “The wind comes in four corners, four directions, four colors, and death rides on four horsemen, a black snake with some black tanks, how much money do these companies need to make?”

Prolific the Rapper’s “Black Snakes” encapsulates the radical passing of Native hip hop bundles. In one singular video, Prolific problematizes the binaries between past and present, traditional and modern, community members and politicians, and rural and urban. He samples—and raps over—“Stadium Pow Wow,” a track by The Halluci Nation (now called A Tribe Called Red) featuring Black Bear, which is built on Native vocal and drumming techniques. Rapping over “traditional” musical practices, he problematizes the traditional/modern dichotomy by calling for future change. Prolific is also both an activist and a community member, akin to how Lakota rapper Nataanii Means describes Native hip hop artists as activists who rhyme. Because he documented police brutality at the DAPL and sounded the land, Prolific was sentenced to seven years in prison. Furthermore, by filming a hip hop video in the rural Dakotas, Prolific is bridging the rural and urban through hip hop, a genre historically associated with cityscapes. Through oral traditions/storytelling, he is telling a story of the People, of his People, of his neighbors, and of the greater Native population in the face of extractive industries. This story is also pedagogy, laying down a curriculum that teaches about ecological warfare while also viscerally showing the power of solidarity and the ecologies of Indigeneity.

For Prolific, documentation was a key part of the music video. At 2:00, halfway through the video, a recorded phone call to the police from a community member on November 20, 2016, at 9 pm plays.

Morton County Sheriff’s Department (MCSD): Morton County Sheriff’s Department?

Community Member (CM): Hi, I need to report an assault.

MCSD: Okay, where did it occur at?

CM: Standing Rock, there are innocent unarmed people being attacked with water and militia-style police, firing at point-blank range with high-powered mace on unarmed people. Who protects the people?

MCSD: Ma'am, yeah if there's police there, then it has been reported.

CM: The police are the ones attacking innocent unarmed people, so what do we do to stop the police literally hitting people at point-blank range in the face? People could lose eyes, people are going to get hypothermia, people could die. We have elders here, we have children here, we have all ages here. Nobody is armed except for the police. Who protects the people from the police?

(long silence) MCSD: Well uh, I guess if you want to, uh, put it up the chain of command, the next person to talk to would be the governor's office.³⁹

Immediately following this phone call, the track comes back in with a haunting cry of vocals. The beat drops again for Prolific to start rapping over.

Drawing on modes of digital survivance and shapeshifting practices, digital media remains a space where information “travel[s] faster than human feet can.” Documenting ecological warfare not only remaps settler colonial power structures, but also sustains the ecologies of Indigeneity. By digitally transmitting information, hip hop as kin allows for relational ways of being to guide and mobilize communities on the ground. Expanding beyond Prolific’s 2017 video, any music video released, any post on social media, any new

³⁹ This is a transcription that I made from the “Black Snakes” music video which can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/QdeHUrL1FEM?si=RZ3D7C98pJRQhoTy>.

record dropped on streaming platforms, or any performance all share Native hip hop bundles.

Breaking the Dichotomy of Tradition and Modernity

Settlers have historically defined modernity. Wakaya scholar Yin Paradies argues that the four “building blocks” to modernity in the Native context are “debt, property, institutions and nation states.”⁴⁰ Scholars such as Bigenho (2011), Lyons (2011), and Diamond, Szego, and Sparling (2012) assert that “Indigenous modernity” seeks to create “alternative” definitions. Diamond, Szego, and Sparling suggest that one path forward is by not just asking “‘what’ is modernity but ‘when’ did modernity begin?”⁴¹ Bigenho discusses this rupture specifically when she documents the initial colonization of Native land.⁴² Tradition became a dichotomy born from colonization and the push into what settlers were calling modern and innovative. Rigney et al contend that

The currently dominant culture of the settler colonial world is typified by its philosophical, artistic and political modernism as a perpetual breaking with tradition in pursuit of “innovation” and “improvement.”⁴³

Similarly, through Sami author Rauna Kuokkanen, Sami ethnographer Jelena Porsanger argues that the “division into these binary oppositions has resulted in an understanding

⁴⁰ Paradies, Yin. “Unsettling truths: modernity, (de-)coloniality and Indigenous futures.” *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2020, pp. 438–456, p. 440.

⁴¹ Diamond, Beverley, Szego, Kati, & Sparling, Heather. “Indigenous Modernities: Introduction.” *MUSICultures*, 39(1), 2012, pp. 1-6, p. 2.

⁴² Bigenho 2011

⁴³ Rigney et al. “Negotiating Indigenous Modernity: Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan—Listen to Ngarrindjeri Speak.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2015, pp. 334–349, pp. 344–345.

that indigenous culture belongs to the pre-modern period and that culture therefore cannot be connected to modernity.”⁴⁴

Diamond, Szego, and Sparling assert that “reclamation, recontextualization, and expansions of ‘traditional’ concepts” are all imperative to understanding “Indigenous modernity.”⁴⁵ Additionally, according to Leech Lake Anishinaabe scholar Scott Richard Lyons, “Indigenous modernity requires a different relationship to the past, one that does not seek to go backward but instead attempts to bring the past forward.”⁴⁶ These definitions inherently bring in notions of time, which, especially across Native cultures, are often non-linear in Nation-specific ways. Modernity must also grapple with and acknowledge the impacts of colonization, as Perea discusses.⁴⁷ Colonization and its effects on globalization too shapes modernity, and Māori literary scholar Michaela Moura-Koçoğlu argues that “the notion of transculturality...aims at capturing processes of culture change and transformation which engender novel forms of indigeneity.”⁴⁸ But even transculturality is not something limited to modern contexts of Indigeneity. Tradition is always influencing modernity and modernity is always influencing traditions as they get passed down through generations. Black and Saginaw Chippewa historian Kyle T. Mays contends that,

We must ask ourselves important questions: what does it mean to be traditional? Who gets to determine what traditional is or is not? And what does it mean to be modern and live in

⁴⁴ Porsanger, Jelena. “The Problematisation of the Dichotomy of Modernity and Tradition in Indigenous and Sami contexts.” In Porsanger, Jelena and Gunvor Guttorm ed. *Working with Traditional Knowledge: Communities, Institutions, Information Systems, Law and Ethics*, Sámi Allaskuvla, 2011, pp. 225–252, p. 231.

⁴⁵ Diamond et al 2012, p. 2

⁴⁶ Lyons 2011, p. 305

⁴⁷ Perea 2021, p. 6

⁴⁸ Moura-Koçoğlu, Michaela. *Narrating Indigenous Modernities*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011, p. 50.

modern times? Can we live, and continue creating new meanings of what it means to be Indigenous?⁴⁹

As Mays exclaims, “yes, of course we can!”⁵⁰ Futurity offers a way to break the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. If modernity for Native Peoples under colonization is defined as “debt, property, institutions and nation states,” then tradition is passing ancestral knowledge and relational ways of living without capitalism.

By bringing the past forward, futurity envisions an end to modernity. Anishinaabe author Grace Dillon first used the term “Indigenous futurism” in 2012, contending that, all forms of Indigenous futurisms are narratives of *biskaabiiyang*, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of ‘returning to ourselves,’ which involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world.⁵¹

Unlike other forms of science fiction, which often root themselves in the otherworldly, Indigenous futurism often presents “familiar landscapes.”⁵² These landscapes are bound to a connection to land-based kin. López and Coello argue that

future(s) and learning(s) inhabit social, spiritual and physical landscapes. Landscapes are the common place that comes about in ideas, stories, narratives about the nature of reality and the self, as well as the climate and geographies that make those stories and ideas possible.⁵³

⁴⁹ Mays, Kyle T. “Can We Live – And Be Modern?: Decolonization, Indigenous Modernity, and Hip Hop.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2015.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Dillon 2012, p. 10

⁵² Baudermann, Kristina. “Indigenous Futurisms in North American Indigenous Art: The Transforming Visions of Ryan Singer, Dniel McCoy, Topaz Jones, Marla Allison, and Debra Yepa-Pappan.” *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1-2, 2016, p. 118.

⁵³ López, Ligia, and Gioconda Coello. *Indigenous Futures and Learnings Taking Place*. Routledge, 2021, p. 10.

Native futurist artists continue to actively interrogate colonial narratives through liberatory and technological pursuits. These pursuits encompass the literary world (Dimaline 2017 and 2021; Whitehead 2020), the physical art world (Carlson 2020; Ortiz 2023), the visual art world (Gergaud 2021), the performing arts world (Recollet 2019), and of course the musical world (Recollet 2016).

Building Native sonic futures through hip hop, then, allows for a Native futurist storytelling practice that engages in the cosmos, the vast spatial geography of Indigeneity, and Native knowledge by passing hip hop bundles. Native hip hop pedagogies, both on the ground and through what I will theorize as the technosphere, aid in building Native futures. By strengthening kinship (between rural/urban, elders/youth, Black/Natives), solidarity through hip hop furthers efforts to dismantle settler infrastructure. Native sonic futures give voice to radical reimaginings of rematriation of life, language revitalization, Land Back, land stewardship, and so much more.

We the New Ancestors

In 2019, Haisla Nation hip hop duo Snotty Nose Rez Kids—composed of Darren "Young D" Metz and Quinton "Yung Trybez" Nyce—released their track "Son of a Matriarch."⁵⁴ In his first verse, Yung Trybez raps "we the new ancestors," a lyric that positions the present generation as both inheritors of the past and architects of the future.⁵⁵ This futurist perspective resists a linear understanding of time, suggesting instead that past, present, and future are relational. To presently be an ancestor, then, is to already be in conversation

⁵⁴ The track can be heard at: <https://youtu.be/mzncLZ3Qk5A?si=hAAIHKMUjOOQI1cz>.

⁵⁵ Ibid, Yung Trybez's verse starts at 2:27

with those not yet born. The non-linear relationship to time finds deep roots in Native thought, particularly in the teaching of the seventh generation.

Shared across many Native communities, the seventh generation principle holds that present decisions must account for their impact seven generations into the future.

Anishinabek Nation scholar John Borrows affirms that “decisions about the future are not supposed to occur without taking [the seventh generation] into account.”⁵⁶ Notably, this teaching represents a form of Indigenous futurism that long precedes contemporary theorizations of the concept. Borrows further explains that it has been seven generations since the Indian Act was enforced in 1876, “purposely designed to assimilate” Natives and “sever the generations.”⁵⁷ Borrows continues by asserting that

We must remember this is the seventh generation! It has been seven cycles since the [Indian] Act was proclaimed. Maybe this generation will take action; they can put an end to the Act’s cancerous decay. They have the potential to turn us back to healthier patterns.

There are prophecies among my people about their gifts. In my eyes I can see these ancient promises coming to pass through their efforts. Many are rising up, retracing ancient steps and rekindling sacred ways. They are striving to be wise, humble, respectful, truthful, brave, loving, and honest. Their good qualities could bring the Indian Act to an end.⁵⁸

The teaching of the seventh generation is a guiding practice for reworlding. It is a teaching to “retrac[e] ancient steps and rekindl[e] sacred ways” that bring the past forward to a futurist perspective.

⁵⁶ Borrows, John. “Seven Generations, Seven Teachings: Ending The Indian Act.” Research Paper for the *National Centre for First Nations Governance*. May, 2008, pp. 1–33, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 3

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 3

An important argument of Dillon is her call to “[recover] ancestral traditions in order to adapt.”⁵⁹ For Dillon, the goal of Indigenous futurism is not to recover traditions and time-travel to the past, but rather to recover traditions in order to adapt and build a future. Furthermore, much like Afrofuturists argue for the recognition of historical influences on science by African communities (as well as notions of space and time), Native technologies and contributions to science and knowledge have equally been influential. By centering Earth, artists utilize storytelling within Native technologies—what I subsequently posit as the Native technosphere—to strengthen kinship across space and time.

The Native Technosphere

While Mark Dery has been credited with coining the term Afrofuturism in 1993, Ytasha Womack traces the building of Black futures and the appropriation of Black technologies in her 2013 book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*.⁶⁰ Black writers, painters, comic artists, and musicians have all engaged in Afrofuturist creative endeavors long before there was a name for it. Within the Afrofuturist scholarship, I first look at three conceptualizations—the Black technosphere, the human and posthuman, and Black sonic technologies.

Film and media studies scholar Anna Everett theorized around the Black technosphere and Blackness in the digital age more broadly.⁶¹ Writing in response to the internet breaking barriers across space/time in the late 90s, she writes that

⁵⁹ Dillon 2012, p. 10

⁶⁰ Womack 2013

⁶¹ Everett, Anna. “The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere.” *Social Text*, no. 71, 2002, pp. 125–46.

It is specifically to this point of spatial and temporal ruptures produced by recent technological advances that the present study of the Internet as a promising site for the establishment of an egalitarian technosphere is initially directed.⁶²

Arguing against the overwhelming domination of white folks using the internet, Everett theorizes a Black technosphere that thrusts Black internet users into the future. Regarding technology within music specifically, media studies scholar Alexander Weheliye balances the human and posthuman through music technology.⁶³ He contends that

By embracing new technologies such as remixing, scratching, and sampling, black popular music producers and performers persistently emphasize...a composite identity, a machine suspended between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines.⁶⁴

The intertwined relationship between Natives and machines is something I will return to in the conclusion of my fourth chapter. Finally, by looking to sonic Black technologies through Afrofuturism and “PhonoFiction,” theorist and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun argues that

Rejecting today's ubiquitous emphasis on black sound's necessary ethical allegiance to the street, this project opens up the new plane of Sonic Fiction, the secret life of forms, the discontinuum of AfroDiasporic Futurism, the chain reaction of PhonoFiction.⁶⁵

The Black technosphere, the human and posthuman, and Black sonic technologies all inform Afrofuturist perspectives on hip hop music-making. Eshun extensively analyzes the breakbeat, while Weheliye looks at scratching and sampling. Alternatively, Everett considers how the digital age affects Blackness. As I argue throughout this dissertation, hip hop, through the technosphere, enables citational practices through sampling, which, in

⁶² Ibid, p. 130

⁶³ Weheliye 2002

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 31

⁶⁵ Eshun 1998, p -003

turn, time-travels and is in conversation with multiple generations at once. Space/time as a non-linear concept is shared by Black and Native communities, furthering moves toward solidarity.

While Everett theorized around the Black technosphere as closing the racialized digital literacy gap in the late 90s, her analysis resided in present—and future—technologies.⁶⁶ My definition of the technosphere, however, extends to cultural technology across generations. Through this theorization, the technosphere has always existed, perhaps just in different forms. Cosmological, medical, and agricultural knowledge as forms of technologies have been a part of Native cultures since time immemorial. As these have shifted over time, it is not as if a technosphere was born; rather, the real-world impact has transformed. Therefore, by engaging with current iterations of digital media, Native hip hop futurists place themselves within a technospheric lineage of passing knowledge. Maya sociologist Genner Llanes-Ortiz has scholarship on digital media as a form of activism, positing the internet as a space for language learning, which aligns with Wemigwans' definition of digital bundles and building futures through Recollet's futurity bundles.⁶⁷ In the midst of the continued apocalypse, digital media and the Native technosphere offer a parallel alternative to the colonization of land and cultural spaces. Tying current technological advances to ancient ones, the Native technosphere spans thousands of years of time and space rather than being an emergent entity with the rise of the digital age.

⁶⁶ Everett 2002, p. 127

⁶⁷ Llanes Ortiz, Genner. "Digital Mayas: Resisting the Invisibilization of Indigenous Voices in Yucatan [Lecture]. 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/7113986/Digital_Mayas_Resisting_the_invisibilisation_of_Indigenous_Voices_in_Yucatan

Diné scholar David Begay contends that, “sacred narratives and stories passed down through the generations tell of cosmological origins, [and] continue[d] evolvment through [multiple] metaphysical worlds.”⁶⁸ Creation stories, storytelling, and other forms of passed-down knowledge take up a vast amount of space and time. Using hip hop and digital platforms to disseminate this music foregrounds the Native technosphere as a space where conversations across generations occur regularly and will continue to do so. In a conversation with Def-i, he explains that,

I got inspired by albums like Deltron 3030 [Deltron 3030’s self-titled album from 2000] and that album was cool because it’s like imagining hip hop in the year 3030. And it’s like, how can I imagine the Indigenous Peoples co-existing in the year 3030? Are we gonna be space traveling? Is there gonna be inter-galactic Indigenous hip hop battles happening?⁶⁹

Def-i’s comments embody the futurity of the Native technosphere. As Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence Gross argued, Natives are always “in the process of building new worlds.”⁷⁰ By envisioning Native hip hop culture in the 3030, Def-i describes the reworlding process, proposing a world potentially rebuilt and restored through Native hip hop.

As reworlding is a futurist practice, it must address the ever-changing technology. Scholar Alicia Inez Guzmán explains that “according to Indigenous [futurist] epistemologies, technology is similar to a shape shifter.”⁷¹ I further her argument and claim that the Native technosphere is also a shapeshifter. Much as shapeshifting has served Native Peoples throughout time, I contend that the technosphere transforms according to the

⁶⁸ Begay, David H. “Diné Worldview and Futurism: A Holistic Perspective.” In Well-Off-Man, Manuela ed. *Indigenous Futurisms: Transcending Past/Present/Future*. Santa Fe: IAIA, 2020, p. 51.

⁶⁹ From a conversation with Def-i on February 28, 2024.

⁷⁰ Gross, Lawrence W. “The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion.” *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, pp. 436–59, p. 449.

⁷¹ Guzmán, Alicia Inez. “Indigenous Futurisms.” *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, March 15, 2015. <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/indigenous-futurisms/>.

needs of the community. Recently, for example, language classes were taught on zoom during the pandemic (Yamane 2023), social media has served a critical role in documenting the violence at protests such as #NoDAPL (Lee 2023), communities continue to build their own internet infrastructures and teach digital literacy (Duarte 2017), and YouTube has been a space to share and pass on cultural knowledge such as recipes (Ayora-Diaz 2019). Guzmán continues by asserting that, “the understanding that technology is essential to contemporary Indigenous constructions of selfhood contrasts longstanding notions of Native peoples as artifacts of a bygone past.”⁷² As a relic’d identity resulting from colonization, the modern—let alone future—Native subject cannot exist from a settler perspective, let alone be a part of technological futures. By representing past, modern, and future Indigeneities within the technosphere, the technological binary of pre- and post-technology is broken. Using current iterations of technology to teach ancient ones blurs popular definitions of the technosphere, calling for connections across space and time.

Throughout this dissertation, I deploy technosphere to contend with how Native hip hop is uploaded, shared, and in conversation with communities both on the ground and in digital spaces. Technologies exist in many forms. While it is important to examine how Native hip hop bundles are circulated through digital spaces, the Native technosphere also encompasses technologies of survivance. These technologies may be utilized in tandem with digital media, but in and of themselves, they are ancient. Thinking of the technosphere as a mode of community building remaps much scholarship that focuses on digital Indigeneities as a new mode of transmitting information and knowledge. This dissertation,

⁷² Guzmán 2015

then, contends that solidarity building, education and pedagogical practice, land stewardship and fostering ecologies of Indigeneity, and building Native futures are all technologies of Indigeneity and part of the Native technosphere. As kin, hip hop gifts responsibility to our human and all our more/other-than-human relations alike, urging us to engage in these technologies of Indigeneity just as much as any other kin. The Native technosphere is but one path towards breaking the loop of the apocalypse.

Breakbeats and Loops: Breaking Free of the Apocalypse

Beat making, looping, and sampling technologies are also critical parts of the Native technosphere. I contend that citational practices such as sampling and loops aid Native hip hop futurists in breaking free of the loop of the apocalypse. Hip hop is founded upon the breakbeats of funk and disco songs. DJs would find instrumental breaks on records and sample them, thus creating loops for bboys/bgirls and early rappers. It is common knowledge that one of the most sampled breakbeats of all time is the “amen break,” which is six seconds from a 1969 B-side track called “Amen, Brother” by The Winstons.⁷³ Played by G.C. Coleman on drums, this break was famously sampled and slowed down by N.W.A. on their track “Straight Outta Compton.”⁷⁴ Set to the backdrop of Black historical music, hip hop was built on Black musical traditions through the use of samples as a citational practice.⁷⁵ Instead of viewing early hip hop as entirely new, I argue that the link between oral tradition accompanied by drumming, rapping, and technological beat making practices

⁷³ The “Amen break” can be heard from 1:26 to 1:32. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxZuq57_bYM.

⁷⁴ Released in 1988. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMZi25Pq3T8>.

⁷⁵ Diamond, Beverley. “The Music of Modern Indigeneity: From Identity to Alliance Studies.” *European Meetings in Ethnomusicology*, vol. 12, no. 22, 2006, pp. 169–90, p. 171.

lends itself to a citational analysis. Each sample that is looped is a citation, aiding connections across space and time. By N.W.A. sampling “Amen, Brother,” not only were they drawing on the funk era, but also on the gospel tradition and Black spirituals more broadly, as “Amen, Brother” was an arrangement of the Negro spiritual “Amen.” These conversations across generations show the power of time travel through sampling and loops.

Looping and sampling as practices have long been theorized by hip hop scholars (Demers 2003; Kitwana 2003; Morgan 2001; Neal 2004; Schloss 2014; Vernon 2021).

Ethnomusicologist Joseph Schloss explains that

The looping aesthetic in particular ...combined a traditional African American approach to composition with new technology to create a radically new way of making music. As breaks are torn from their original context and repeated, they are conceived—by the performer and listener alike—as circular, even if their original harmonic or melodic purposes were linear. In other words, melodies become riffs. The end of a phrase is juxtaposed with the beginning in such a way that the listener begins to anticipate the return of the beginning as the end approaches.⁷⁶

Two of the many “traditional African American approach[es] to composition” that Schloss is referring to are those of the blues and jazz. The 12-bar blues is its own contained loop, while jazz compositions (known as “heads”) are repeated and the end of the melody “is juxtaposed with the beginning.” Loops in genres like the blues and jazz were both linear and circular, harmonically and melodically. Sampling and looping did not create a new way of thinking about harmony and melody, but rather created a truncated version of blues and jazz “heads” that rethought time (beats/measures/bars).

⁷⁶ Schloss 2014, p. 61

Similarly, Native hip hop utilizes citational practices on multiple levels. By engaging in the same sampling and loop-making process, Native rappers and producers honor hip hop's history. Many artists, however, sample parts of their own culture from drumming, flute playing, or vocal practices. For example, Apsáalooke rapper Supaman uses his flute playing in tracks, while Muskowekwan rapper Drezus sampled an Idle No More protest on his track "Red Winter." Rosebud Sioux rapper Prolific the Rapper samples A Tribe Called Red's beat on "Black Snakes," which uses vocal practices, while Anishinaabe rapper Sacramento Knox uses drumming practices on his track "Bwaanzhii-Niimi (Dance the War Dance)." Mixing these distinct parts of Indigeneity with hip hop beat and loop-making, artists are building their own spatial and temporal connections, directly engaging in conversations with ancestors through these citations. Much like Black hip hop, sampling and creating loops using technology sonically mediates and blurs the line between oral traditions and futures.

Rooted in citational practices, a character in Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange's novel *Wandering Stars* describes his music-making process as a Native person by incorporating old field recordings from colonial archives. Through his character, Orange writes that the goal was

to try and make musical loops that wouldn't sound or feel like loops because of the way they were built, that's the way out of a loop. Every day is a loop...Every day is life convincing us it's not a loop.⁷⁷

While mainstream science fiction often depicts the apocalypse as a futuristic event caused by climate change, another world war, or technological warfare or alien invasion, Dillon

⁷⁷ Orange, Tommy. *Wandering Stars*. Knopf: New York, 2024, p. 305.

accurately describes the moment of colonial encounter as the start of the Native apocalypse. The loop of survival in the face of disaster fuels popular tales of science fiction through otherworldly world-building. At the colonial encounter, however, settlers started an apocalypse using biological warfare and militarized eradication methods. While the numbers vary from scholar to scholar, an estimated 90% of the Native population on Turtle Island was murdered in the initial years after contact.⁷⁸ Much like science fiction portrayals of apocalypses, only a few survived. Through the loss of land, the reservation system, pipelines, and so much more, Natives are still in the loop of survival due to the persisting impacts of colonization. In their book on Indigenizing the fight for environmental justice, ecologist and member of the Colville Confederated Tribes Dina Gilio-Whitaker contends that, “to be a person of direct Indigenous descent in the U.S. today is to have survived a genocide of cataclysmic proportions.”⁷⁹ Because of the calculated removal of land and ways of life, every day for over five hundred years has been a loop of survival, and the apocalypse still is not over.

As a genre built on loops, I argue that Native futurist artists read the loop of the apocalypse onto the loop of the beat. Loops, created from breakbeats in funk and disco tracks, often function like the pulse of drums at powwows and ceremonies. On a track called “M.M.I.W.,” Anishinaabe rapper SouFy raps, “we still dance to the sound of the drum, now ain’t that somethin’?”⁸⁰ The beat of the drum, as a pulse, is a loop of great cultural importance across many Native communities. By using drum loops in hip hop beats, artists like SouFy are fighting the loop of the apocalypse. As Orange said, “that’s the way out of a

⁷⁸ Many historians have published differing numbers, but I cite: Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Boston, Beacon Press, 2015.

⁷⁹ Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Beacon Press, 2019, p. 49.

⁸⁰ SouFy’s verse on “M.M.I.W.” Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQDH5qoUqc>.

loop.” Schloss argued that “breaks are torn from their original context and repeated.”⁸¹ As I flesh out more thoroughly in chapter four, the break can also be seen as a rupture. The breakbeats that build the loops of Native hip hop break from continued colonization and extractive industries. Tied to citational practices that span across generations, loops are the groundwork for oral tradition and storytelling to connect across space and time, transmitting knowledge between ancestors from before, during, and after the apocalypse. Hip hop is our way out of the loop.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter broadly answers the question: Why hip hop? Here, I draw out a long, complex, and nuanced history of colonization between Blackness and Indigeneity. I lay out a history of enslaved Natives and Black Indians as an alternative story to the narratives that the curriculum teaches in school. I then trace the early race-based schooling curriculum and erasure of ancestral knowledge through Indian Boarding Schools and segregated classrooms. In this section, I explore ideologies such as phrenology and the SATs that measured intelligence. Next, I look at migration and the (re)population of urban areas. I contend that the Great Migration and the rise of urban Natives began to shape solidarities through proximity, facilitated by infrastructure such as redlining. Next, I investigate the important ways in which the Red Power and Black Power Movements are deeply entwined and have shared coalition-building across these civil rights movements. Finally, I explore the rise of Native hip hop and its historical positionality to Blackness. By looking at who was touring on the reservation and the oral history of early Native hip hop, mapping this

⁸¹ Schloss 2014, p. 61

network breaks the dominant narrative that Natives just heard hip hop and resonated with the message. While sonic exposure is one aspect, I contend that there is a broader history of solidarity and coalition-building through hip hop that deepens our current understanding of Blackness within Native hip hop. This creation story—of Black/Native solidarity and of Native hip hop—unwraps and exposes the settler creation story that starts at the colonial encounter and centers “civilizing” projects.

The second chapter argues that hip hop offers a pedagogy that draws on oral tradition and storytelling, foregrounding the rematriation of curriculum. Extending my analysis from chapter one, I show that hip hop directly goes against settler infrastructure that was created to prioritize white intelligence, forefronting Native ways of passing knowledge outside of Western education and teaching through a Native hip hop pedagogy. Following Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s argument to conceive of land as pedagogy, I contend that Native hip hop pedagogy is Native hip hop as pedagogy. Native hip hop as kin allows for the teaching and passing of knowledge not as an institution-informed curriculum but as a tool of survivance. It is learning from hip hop as kin, not learning about hip hop as an object of study. The second chapter, then, is in two parts—Native hip hop pedagogy that passes bundles centering knowledge, and that which centers language. The first section examines knowledge and pedagogy at festivals, workshops, and shows hosted by venues. Across these different spaces, Native rappers deploy curriculum through their performances and community engagement. The second section, on the other hand, is centered on language education, focusing on artists from the Americas who use Native hip hop bundles to transmit language knowledge across space and time.

The third chapter builds towards a Native hip hop ecology, a hip hop practice that is not only an extension of the land and its continued histories, but also of the People and how they are relations of the land through the lens of Native feminist land ethics. First, I examine extractive industries and show their impact on Native land and reservations. Next, I turn to three mujeres indígenas (Native women)—Mare Advertencia Lirika, Janeydi Molina, and Zara Monrroy. Here, I trace how extractive industries cross colonial borders, calling for a transnational analysis and for expanding the necessity of growing ecologies of Indigeneity. Then, I offer a transcription of a listening session I had with Def-i, in which he discussed the inspiration behind two of his tracks, “Water Is Life” and “Don’t Drink the Water.” Finally, I present Ras K’Dee, a hip hop artist and member of the group Audiopharmacy. In this section, I explore Native hip hop as a tool to sound ecological practices. By exploring events such as their performance as a soundtrack to an ancestral canoe-making event, I argue that Native hip hop is not just a means of socio-political activism, but can also share ancestral knowledge about the land and our way of living with the land as a relation through broader ecologies of Indigeneity. Drawing on Native hip hop (red/rematriated) pedagogy, this chapter argues that Native hip hop ecology sounds all of our relations.

Finally, the last chapter pulls all of these threads together and argues for Sound Back that can aid in the return of Native ways of life, building the infrastructure for thriving futures. Sound Back is a growing movement of sonic stewardship. While stewardship does apply to intellectual property (IP) law and “ownership” of cultural expression more broadly, I expand upon Trevor Reed to draw on ecologies of Indigeneity to argue that Sound Back is not only interested in taking back recording rights from settler archives, but it is also interested in building upon Native sonic archives that have always existed. First, Native

record labels provide sonic stewardship and legally have self-governance of the recordings, reflecting their own responsibility to archive the future. Second, Sound Back encompasses sonic gatherings that are run by Natives, especially in settler spaces. Drawing on Elspeth Iralu's theorizing of re/unmapping settler geographies through spatial justice, injecting sound into these practices pushes toward Sound Back. Festivals, open mics, performances at venues, and even just busking on the sidewalk in settler spaces assert them as Native spaces. Re/unmapping these settler containments through sound has the power to break them. Third, Sound Back remixes and loops recordings from settler archives. Not only does sampling start intergenerational conversations, but the act of sampling archival recordings also brings them back to the community. These field recordings tell stories of our ancestors, and sampling them is sonically bringing our ancestors home.

Pulling all of these chapters together, my conclusion looks to the ecological futures of Native hip hop's pedagogies of joy. To assume the responsibility gifted by Native hip hop bundles requires one to be not only attuned to cultural knowledge but also to Native politics of joy. Native humor is critical to how communities share and pass knowledge, and joy and laughter decentralize the very tools of colonization. Joy resides in Native hip hop—in all its elements. Joy also teaches and passes on the knowledge that cyphers are about the ecologies of Indigeneity, and that those inter/intratribal connections and gatherings are what build Native futures. Native joy is radical because it pushes back on the “stoic Native” image of trauma-laden leaders often captured by early anthropologists. By reworlding and remapping the forced containments of settler geographies, Native hip hop joy serves as a rupture, weaving together histories and futures in every Native hip hop bundle.

Chapter 1

Black/Native Solidarities: Education, Power Movements, and Hip Hop

Creation Stories

Many years ago, there was a mean one named Zithü who controlled the xi'mhai [the land]. It was a dark time, and shadows consumed all the corners of the earth. Zithü's people walked the land, seeking out any that opposed their ways. One day, they were chasing a child who was trying to cross the valley. The child was almost out of their grasp when the child was shot by an arrow and taken prisoner. Zithü's people held the child captive under a dāza [tree] and asked a meta [a rooster] to watch over the child. If the child even so much as moved, the rooster was told to call out for help. The shadows crawled their way across the valley and slithered behind the mbonthi [the mountains], and so the first day passed without a sound. The shadows once again came and went, and so the second day too passed without a sound from the rooster. The third day, too, passed in silence as the shadows made their way again across the valley and rejuvenated Zithü's people with darkness. On the fourth day, the rooster finally tsangui [made song] to alert Zithü's people. They began to run over to the tree but quickly realized that the child had long since escaped. The child had freed themselves days before and was climbing the tree into the sky. As the child climbed, drops from the tree started to fall. It started out lightly, but soon these drops were hitting the ground with force. The drops were seeds, fertilizing the hmai [the land/the world] and seeding dethä [corn]. Stalks began shooting up from the ground, slowing the movement of

Zithü's people. By the time they finally reached the trunk of the dāza, the darkness had begun to disappear. When Zithü's people looked up into the sky, it was no longer full of shadows. The child had climbed so high that they had turned into the hyadi [sun], breaking the shadows with their rays and pouring life into the dethä down below. This is how hyadi and dethä came to be.

* * *

This is my ancestors' creation story of the sun and corn. It is also about knowing how they came to be kin in order to help us move through this world. This story explains relations—the rooster's relationship to the child, and the humans' relationships to the sun, the corn, the tree, and the land. Moreover, even through the Hñähñu language, the rooster did not “crow” in isolation. Instead, the word used is “tsangui” or “thuhu,” meaning “song” or “call,” drawing connections between land, animals, humans, and the arts. Creation stories also show—and share—responsibility. The rooster gave to the child, who gave to the land. They all share a responsibility toward one another.

There are other creation stories: these are the ones told by those in power to construct a narrative. In a live conversation between activist, educator, and scholar Eve Ewing and writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ewing noted that the U.S. as a settler nation “requires these different technologies of maintenance.”⁸² She further explains that

In order to keep this illusion going, you have to keep feeding it and feeding it. And so it requires a school system that has kids, you know, dress up as these people and say like, “here's the story, here's what happened.” With like construction paper pilgrim hats, right? It requires the idea of us referring to these folks as the founding fathers. It requires essentially

⁸² Family Action Network. “Eve L. Ewing and Ta-Nehisi Coates - Original Sins.” May 23, 2025. https://youtu.be/8U8SwECSzhQ?si=iBrWR_ewJxojo4nr, 49:56

a new creation myth, right? All cultures have their creation myths about where people came from—from a star, from a turtle, from the ocean, from the sun, right? And the United States has its own creation myth, that we—it's a story that we invented that starts the narrative of everything that matters at a very specific point in time, as though nothing occurred before and there was no one here before.⁸³

This type of creation story then, requires the completion of the project aimed to erase Natives.⁸⁴ The very idea of Natives in our present means that someone was here before settlers, which debunks the creation story and the narrative that maintains the settler project. To quote a character from Blackfeet novelist Stephen Graham Jones in his book *The Buffalo Hunter Hunter*, “what I am is the Indian who can’t die, I’m the worst dream America ever had.”⁸⁵

As settlers continued westward expansion, the “Wild West” and the Gold Rush, the forced evacuation of land for oil drilling and pipelines, and even the creation of the National Parks themselves all relocated Natives from their ancestral lands.⁸⁶ The transplanting of Natives on reservation land is embedded in the fabric of colonization.⁸⁷ Later in the 1800s, manifest destiny thrived because willing regular “Americans” believed in the propaganda that they were entitled to the removal, containment, and murder of Natives. Before that, however, the clearing of Natives in the South was to make way for the creation of cotton

⁸³ Ibid, 30:49

⁸⁴ To me, the meaning of myth as a creation story has shifted to myth being mostly defined as something that is not true. Myths are seen as stories that are made up, yet we tell them anyway to teach a moral lesson or some other teaching. I deploy creation stories because these stories are part of cosmologies and ways of understanding that are not seen as false. I also talk about the creation story of the U.S. this way because it is meant to be a truth in the eyes of settlers.

⁸⁵ Jones, Stephen Graham. *The Buffalo Hunter Hunter*. Saga Press: New York, 2025, p. 163.

⁸⁶ Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Beacon Press, 2019.

⁸⁷ Blackhawk, Ned. *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West*. Harvard University Press, 2006.

plantations and the mass enslavement of Africans. Black decolonial studies scholar Katherine McKittrick contends that through relocation (both forcibly relocating Africans to the Americas and relocating Natives off their land), “the interlocking workings of human worth, race, and space demonstrate the ways the uninhabitable still holds currency in the present and continues to organize contemporary geographic arrangements.”⁸⁸ This geography is not just a physical arrangement, but an arrangement that defines the landscape of Black and Native erasure, surveillance, and education. The uninhabitable is both the reservations and the projects. However, it is also the space that defines the lack of access to rights, knowledge, wealth, and visibility. The uninhabitable is a geographic arrangement that fuels technologies of maintenance, upholding settler creation stories.

This chapter, though, is a different kind of creation story. It is the creation story of Native and Black solidarity, coalition-building through hip hop, and Native hip hop itself. While it does start with removal and plantations, I lay out a history of enslaved Natives and Black Indians as an alternative story to the narratives that the curriculum teaches in school. I then trace the early race-based schooling curriculum and erasure of ancestral knowledge through Indian Boarding Schools and segregated classrooms, which developed ideologies such as phrenology and the SATs that measured intelligence. Next, I look to migration and the (re)population of urban areas, as I contend that the Great Migration and the rise of urban Natives began to shape contemporary solidarities through proximity, facilitated by infrastructure such as redlining. I then investigate the important ways in which the Red Power and Black Power Movements are deeply entwined and have shared coalition-building across these civil rights movements. Finally, I map the rise of Native hip

⁸⁸ McKittrick, Katherine. “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2013, pp. 1–15, p. 6.

hop's history and relationship to Blackness. By looking at who was touring on the reservation and the oral history of early Native hip hop, mapping this network breaks the dominant narrative that Natives just heard hip hop and resonated with the message. There is a whole history of solidarity and coalition-building through hip hop that deepens our current understanding of Blackness within Native hip hop, and the creation story I offer here—of Black/Native solidarity and of Native hip hop—unwraps and exposes the propaganda of the settler creation story that starts at the colonial encounter and centers “civilizing” projects.

Throughout this chapter, the histories displayed are immense and entangled in such a way that it is difficult not to discuss what is presented without also discussing what is left out. However, I acknowledge and know that these histories are vast. Any chance I can, I will provide further reading in footnotes on dedicated histories that I cannot attend to in this dissertation. Additionally, this chapter seeks to fill a gap in Native hip hop scholarship. There exists literature on Black/Native solidarity (Brant & Webber 2022; Hitchmough & Mays 2024; Mays 2021; Mays 2026; Moreno-Tabarez 2020; Penniman 2024; Pitts 2023) as well as literature on Native hip hop (Amsterdam 2013; Bell 2017; Cru 2018; Harris and Butler 2023; Kent 2018; Mays 2016, 2018 and 2019; Sheffield 2011; Swinehart 2012; Ullestad 1999). Most of the literature on Native hip hop, however, focuses on Indigeneity. This is not a negative critique by any means, but it is an observation. As Mays has pointed out, hip hop studies has very few scholars who work on Native hip hop so focusing on Indigeneity is powerful. In these texts, a brief history of hip hop is often explained, and sometimes a brief narrative of Native hip hop (Navarro 2016). Despite these historical summaries, there is a lack of substantial research on Black/Native hip hop solidarities. One

example, however, is Mays' chapter titled "'He's Just Tryna Be Black': The Intersections of Blackness and Indigeneity in Hip Hop Culture."⁸⁹ Mays' chapter does important work for the intersections at a kind of present in 2018, and of course, it is still relevant to this dissertation. While all this scholarship exists, my intervention lies in a much more historical question: why hip hop? How did the two histories of these two Peoples converge and diverge and converge again? How did Native hip hop actually come to be? I still argue that Native hip hop is ancient, and that the seeds were planted long ago. This chapter is an attempt at a creation story.

The "Other Slavery" and Black Indians

Drawing on McKittrick's work, this section shows that the plantation and the reservation are not locations divided by race, but in fact are woven together through colonization. The historical presence of Natives on plantations and Black folks on reservations complicates the popular separation of these two geographic locations, and by exposing their long legacy of interconnectedness, this chapter places shared experiences of settler subjugation as part of the creation of Black/Native solidarity. As geographies, both the plantation and the reservation serve(d) settler ideology and provide(d) capital for the settler state (Genay 2019; Burnard 2015). The removal of Natives gave "free land" to settlers seeking to realize the early "American dream," while simultaneously providing space for plantations that also fueled the American market.⁹⁰ Natives were enslaved—in a modern context of the word that draws on surveillance, imprisonment, and control—to their given reservation land, just

⁸⁹ Mays 2018, pp. 97–112

⁹⁰ Roediger, David R. "Removing Indians, Managing Slaves, and Justifying Slavery." In Ritter, Sabine and Wigger, Iris (eds.). *Racism and Modernity: Festschrift for Wulf D. Hund*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011, pp. 117–30.

as Black folks were forcibly removed from their land and put on plantations (Biolsi 2020; Phillips 1997). However, Natives were also physically enslaved on plantations, and Black folks lived on reservations. The fact that this knowledge is suppressed as a tool of settler maintenance continues to uphold a divide between communities within discourse on the ground.

In historian Andrés Reséndez's book *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*, he traces México's enslavement practices in the fields of ranches in what is now the Southwest and parts of northern California.⁹¹ Many Mexican towns were built by Native labor. While Sonoma, California was founded by Mariano G. Vallejo in 1835—thirteen years after the start of the missionary project in what is currently the Bay Area—it was not until the 1840s that his brother, Salvador Vallejo, finally visited. At this time, the 66,000-acre ranch was run by seven hundred enslaved Natives.⁹² Reséndez relays Salvador Vallejo's own words, where shortly after his visit he stated the Native men

tilled our soil, pastured our cattle, sheared our sheep, cut our lumber, built our houses, paddled our boats, made tiles for our houses, ground our grain, killed our cattle, dressed their hides for the market, and made our unburned bricks; while the women made excellent servants, took good care of our children and made every one of our meals...the Indians knew that our superior education gave us the right to command and rule them.⁹³

This “command” to “rule” Natives was enacted because the enslavement of Black folks was abolished by México in September 1829 by Afro-Native president Vicente Guerrero. As a

⁹¹ Reséndez, Andrés. *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

⁹² Ibid, p. 248

⁹³ Vallejo, José Manuel Salvador, and Hubert Howe Bancroft. *Notas Históricas Sobre California*. Sonoma, California, 1874, p. 46.

result, Reséndez points out that Spanish Mexicans in the California area would send “out armed expeditions to seize Indians practically every year” to gain more labor.⁹⁴

The nineteenth century also saw an influx of Americans moving West. When they arrived in California, they had to abide by the laws put in place by México—they could not enslave Black folks, but they could enslave Natives. Even after the Mexican American War and the official start of the goldrush, Americans still were able to find ways to continue these practices. The Indian Act of 1850 made it so that any Native to be deemed a vagrant—even for simply walking the streets—would be convicted and hired out to the highest bidder for up to four months.⁹⁵ In these areas that did not have any enslaved Black folks, Reséndez writes that “in short, any [white] citizen could obtain Indian servants through convict leasing.”⁹⁶ Natives were, in fact, initially enslaved in the Americas, but Spanish clergyman and lawyer Bartolomé de las Casas fought the Spanish courts, thus leading Spain to turn towards predominantly African enslaved labor.⁹⁷ It was not until 1829, under Afro-Native president Vicente Guerrero, that México abolished the enslavement of Africans. In the wake of Guerrero’s decision, Spanish-Mexican nobility returned to enslaving Natives through legal loopholes. While there were, of course, many other forms of enslaving Natives, such as the history of Mormons in the Southwest, the example of California represents what Ewing calls the “technologies of maintenance.”⁹⁸ Knowing that white Americans traveling West would push the boundaries of slavery did a great deal of work for

⁹⁴ Reséndez 2016, p. 249

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 265

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 265

⁹⁷ Jorati, Julia, “Bartolomé de las Casas, History of the Indies (before 1561).” In Jorati, Julia. *Slavery in Early Modern Philosophy 1500-1765: Essential Readings*. Oxford Academic, 2025, pp. 47–52.

⁹⁸ Family Action Network, 49:56

the U.S. government in order to maintain the settler state, relying on their loyalty to the settler project so that the government itself did not have to use its own resources.

Alternatively, the history of Black Indians is equally as complex and something I cannot attend to in full.⁹⁹ For this dissertation, it is important to note that Black folks and Natives have lived together in community since just after the first enslaved Black folks were forced on this land. As Black folks began freeing themselves, they often fled to Native communities. Scholar Chelsea Souter explains that there were many “Indian tribes that did not see blacks as property to be returned, so they were instead either integrated into the tribes or at least allowed to live near them.”¹⁰⁰ Black Indians have been a part of Native communities for hundreds of years, but their status has shifted due to settler ideology. As I will return to in the next section on schooling, “whites greatly feared the unification of blacks and Indians against colonization, so they tried to build up prejudices.”¹⁰¹ One of these projects was making Natives into slave owners, which was not only part of the “civilizing” project but also meant to divide Black/Native solidarity further. White folks deemed these few Nations that actively participated in slavery—whether out of fear of repercussions or by choice to prove their own proximity to whiteness—the “Five Civilized Tribes,” which consisted of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee, and Seminole Nations.

Many Black Indians were therefore enslaved even though they were previously free in these communities. As Souter explains,

all those with African blood needed to be viewed as inferior for slavery and the resulting social stratification to work. All blacks had to be seen as natural slaves to justify their

⁹⁹ For an incredible volume of fifty-five essays, see Straus, Terry, et al. *Race, Roots, and Relations: Native and African Americans*. Albatross Press, 2005.

¹⁰⁰ Souter, Chelsea. “Outside the Box: Black Indian Identity in the United States.” In Straus, Terry, et al. *Race, Roots, and Relations: Native and African Americans*. Albatross Press, 2005, pp. 270–284, p. 273.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 274

treatment. [Settlers] believed that those partially black also needed to be treated as such because otherwise chaos could ensue; too many people seen as black would be free.

Therefore, [white] slave owners felt it was necessary to alter the rules of maternal lineage status. It was changed to the socially constructed hypo-descent rule that assigns people of mixed race to the subordinate racial group.

Through this process, Black Indians began to get erased. Once the Civil War was over, the Treaty of 1866 was made specifically with the “Five Civilized Tribes,” abolishing slavery for them as well. Many Freedmen and Black Indians chose to stay in Native communities, building new lives.

Despite early integration, erasure of Black Indians continued with the creation of blood quantum, Tribal citizenship, and census reports.¹⁰² With these infrastructures in place, assigning “people of mixed race to the subordinate racial group” now had direct implications on the erasure of Black Indians, as Tribes often could not claim them, nor were they recognized as Native on the census. Because of the way settlers categorized mixed Peoples in fear of unification, Black folks—including Black Indians—and Natives were educated in different spaces, and Black Indians were told to forget part of their identity. These intertwined histories, however, would ultimately serve as the basis for Black/Native solidarity in the 60s and beyond.

¹⁰² For a deeper understanding, see the following:

Hill Jr., Norbert and Kathleen Ratteree. *The Great Vanishing Act: Blood Quantum and the Future of Native Nations*. Fulcrum Publishing, 2017, pp. 246–259.

Miller, Mark Edwin. “Adrift with the Indian Office: The Historical Development of Tribal Acknowledgment Policy, 1776–1978.” In Miller, Mark Edwin. *Forgotten Tribes: Unrecognized Indians and the Federal Acknowledgment Process*. University of Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 23–46.

Wilkins, David E. and Shelly Hulse Wilkins. “Federal Power and Citizenship in Indian Country.” In *Dismembered: Native Disenrollment and the Battle for Human Rights*. University of Washington Press, 2017, pp. 26–42.

The Privatization of Knowledge: A Brief History of Schooling

For thousands of years, the passing of knowledge in Black and Native communities has been negotiated through oral tradition in different ways that oppose capitalism. As the settler project grew, schooling turned into a way to assimilate those into whiteness. While settlers and immigrants—such as Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants—flooded the U.S., schooling and the erasure of language were tools that transformed these communities into “white,” despite early discrimination (Dooley 1998; Guglielmo 2004, Waldinger 2001).¹⁰³ The creation of standardized curriculum and tools to measure intelligence, however, were targeted to erase Black and Native ways of teaching and knowing.

In 1798, the African School, founded by free Black folks in Boston, began to educate their youth.¹⁰⁴ By 1812, the Boston Public School system had taken control of the African School and integrated it into its larger system.¹⁰⁵ Boston began to send all the Black children to this one school in order to uphold segregation and educate the Black youth differently from the white youth. Just seven years later, on March 3, 1819, the U.S. government, under President James Monroe, passed the Civilization Fund Act, aimed at Native Peoples. Monroe wrote,

To civilize them, and even to prevent their extinction, it seems to be indispensable that their independence as communities should cease, and that the control of the United States over them should be complete and undisputed. The hunter state will then be more easily

¹⁰³ For further reading, see the following:

Dooley, Brian. *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland & Black America*. Pluto Press, 1998.

Guglielmo, Thomas A. *White on Arrival : Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Waldinger, Roger. “How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America.” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2001, pp. 138–43.

¹⁰⁴ Ewing 2025, p. 58

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

abandoned, and recourse will be had to the acquisition and culture of land and to other pursuits tending to dissolve the ties which connect them together as a savage community and to give a new character to every individual.¹⁰⁶

The act funded white missionaries to build schools near or on Native communities' land in order to teach youth how to be "civil." As Ewing states, the early projects of schooling Black and Native youth "were united by the same basic premise: the task of civilization."¹⁰⁷ The curriculum, therefore, of these projects was not about building the same knowledge base as that of white children through reading books, but rather about gaining a deeper understanding of the world. Instead, it was about teaching the very ways to act and move in the "civilized" world, "bring[ing] them closer to the White man's way of life" without giving them the means to dismantle it.¹⁰⁸

The education of Black and Native folks over the next fifty years was largely seen as a success according to the settler state from the early 1800s through Reconstruction. Part of the agreed-upon success was due to the science of phrenology. Based on the study of Black and Native skulls, it was believed that they couldn't achieve any level of real intelligence.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the very practice of phrenology was rooted in viewing Black and Native folks as criminals and not worthy of redemption.¹¹⁰ Through segregated curricula, many Natives learned anti-Blackness and were encouraged to partake in the owning of Black enslaved people.¹¹¹ While Boarding/Residential Schools taught

¹⁰⁶ Lcrawfor. "James Monroe's Trail of Tears." James Monroe Museum. November 28, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://jamesmonroemuseum.umw.edu/2022/11/28/james-monroes-trail-of-tears/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ewing 2025, p. 61

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Poskett, James. *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815-1920*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Thompson, Courtney E. *An Organ of Murder: Crime, Violence, and Phrenology in Nineteenth-Century America*. Rutgers University Press, 2021.

¹¹¹ Miles, Tiya. *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*. 2nd ed. University of California Press, 2015.

anti-Blackness in order to bring Native youth closer to a “civilized” (white) people, the education of Black youth simultaneously tried to “civilize” Black youth enough and taught the rhetoric that Natives were “savages.”¹¹²

One of the critical ways in which settlers taught separation between Black and Native folks was through (forced) loyalty in the armed forces. While Black folks fought in the Civil War on both sides, they were integral as the newly formed Buffalo Soldiers, consisting of formerly enslaved Black men who made up the Tenth Cavalry.¹¹³ The Buffalo Soldiers, led by General Richard Henry Pratt, aided in the Western expansion and continued genocide of what the U.S. had deemed the “Wild West.”¹¹⁴ Because of his time leading the Buffalo Soldiers,

Pratt had become convinced—counter to the beliefs of many of his contemporaries—that “savages” were not completely irredeemable. Given the structure of military life and access to the White man’s civilization, he reasoned, Black people had gone from being beasts to being men. Why not make the same attempt with the Indians? And thus his famous, blood-chilling maxim was born: “Kill the Indian. Save the man.”¹¹⁵

Schreier, Jesse T. “Indian or Freedman?: Enrollment, Race, and Identity in the Choctaw Nation, 1896-1907.” *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2011, pp. 458–479.

Tayac, Gabrielle, ed. *IndiVisible: African-Native American Lives in the Americas*. Smithsonian Books, 2009.

¹¹² As with much in this chapter, I am trying to tell a broader shared history and one that is woven together only to break and come back together again. Statements such as these are not to generalize two Peoples in their entirety. The nuance required has been attended to in many books on separate topics, but my point is rather that this did occur. Was every Native person taught to internalize anti-Blackness? Of course not. Was every Black person taught to think of Natives as “savages”? Of course not. But it did happen. And that alone is what I hope to trace as part of this complicated story of Black/Native solidarity.

¹¹³ Glasrud, Bruce A. *Brothers to the Buffalo Soldiers : Perspectives on the African American Militia and Volunteers, 1865-1917*. University of Missouri, 2011.

¹¹⁴ Kenner, Charles L. *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867–1898: Black and White Together*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2014.

¹¹⁵ Ewing 2025, p. 79

In 1865, Pratt brutally marched a group of people from the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Comanche Nations in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to Fort Marion, Florida (1,237 miles) for the unthinkable crimes of “rebellion.”¹¹⁶ It was here that his plan started.

Upon arrival at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, FL, Pratt cut all the Natives’ hair and gave them old military uniforms, treating them as soldiers and as captives at the same time.¹¹⁷ After a year of surveillance and rewards for good behavior, Pratt had trained his captives to surveil each other.¹¹⁸ Soon, he began taking them outside the prison walls and even letting tourists visit his experiment. Through these visitations, he connected with Sarah Mather who had “operate[d] an industrial training school for Black girls.”¹¹⁹ With the aid of volunteer white women, they added a schoolhouse to educate the Native prisoners.¹²⁰ Another visitor to the prison was one of Mather's friends, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe.¹²¹ In the years to follow, Stowe published many pieces documenting her time at Fort Marion.¹²² In a publication of the *Christian Union*, using Pratt’s model she argued that

¹¹⁶ Crowe, F. Hilton. “Indian Prisoner-Students at Fort Marion: The Founding of Carlisle Was Dreamed in St. Augustine.” *The Regional Review*, vol. 5, no. 6, 1940.

https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/regional_review/vol5-6c.htm.

¹¹⁷ Pitcher Hayes, Sarah Kathryn. “The Experiment at Fort Marion: Richard Henry Pratt’s Recreation of Penitential Regimes at the Old Fort and Its Influence on American Indian Education.” *Journal of Florida Studies*, vol. 1, no. 7, 2018, pp. 1–21.

¹¹⁸ Glancy, Diane. *Fort Marion Prisoners and the Trauma of Native Education*. UNP - Nebraska, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Ewing 2025, p. 81

¹²⁰ Pitcher Hayes, 2018

¹²¹ Del Guercio, Gerardo. *The Fugitive Slave Law in The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin: An American Society Transforms Its Culture*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2013.

¹²² Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe: With Biographical Introductions, Portraits, and Other Illustrations*. vol. 8. Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1896.

We have tried fighting and killing the Indians, and gained little by it. We have tried feeding them as paupers in their savage state, and the result has been dishonest contractors, and invitation and provocation to war. Suppose we try education?¹²³

In his own words, as published in his collection of memoirs, Pratt tried to convince Carl Schurz, the thirteenth United States Secretary of the Interior, that he needed to obtain the use of the abandoned Civil War barracks in Carlisle, PA, to start his own school.¹²⁴ He wrote

You yourself, sir, are one of the best examples of what we ought to do for the Indians. You immigrated to America as an individual. You came into the fullest freedom here in association with the best of our people. Indians need these same chances of participation, and they will as easily become useful citizens.¹²⁵

Schurz agreed to allow Pratt to use the barracks, and shortly after, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was founded in 1879.¹²⁶

Until 1879, missionary-run schooling was on or near Native lands and reservations. One of the biggest complaints from white women educators was that they could not get the youth to stop speaking their language and ultimately were not able to fully “kill the Indian.” Pratt, however, saw how the Transatlantic Slave Trade had brought people from disparate Nations and stripped them of their culture and language. Therefore, he fashioned Carlisle after Fort Marion. He forcibly removed Native youth from different Nations so they could not speak to each other, and brought them far away from their communities so they were disconnected from family and friends. To ensure removal, Pratt promised Native

¹²³ Pratt, Richard Henry. *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904*. Yale University Press, 1964, p. 162.

¹²⁴ Trefousse, Hans L. "Carl Schurz and the Indians." *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1984, pp. 109–120, p. 115.

¹²⁵ Eastman, Elaine Goodale. *Pratt; The Red Man's Moses*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935, p. 77.

¹²⁶ Trefousse 1984, p. 115

communities a chance for their youth to learn about “American” society.¹²⁷ He promised that the goal was

to teach English and give a primary education and knowledge of some common and practical Industry, or means of self-support among civilized people. To this end mechanic shops and farms [are] provided where the principal mechanical arts and farming [are] taught the boys, and the girls [are] taught cooking, sewing, laundry and housework.¹²⁸

After he gained government funding,

The run-down buildings of the old barracks were renovated and new structures were added. The school farming area was increased from 27 to 303 acres. And the annual student enrollment expanded from the initial 120 until it reached over a thousand young Indian men and women representing virtually every one of the more than 80 tribes in the United States.¹²⁹

He cut their hair and gave them uniforms that—although they were not military uniforms—were white folks’ clothing to begin the process of forced assimilation.¹³⁰

Soon, government laws required Native youth to attend boarding schools, many of which were established under early treaties.¹³¹ It is estimated that by 1900, “75 percent of Native children were enrolled in boarding schools.”¹³² In the years to come, “there were more than 526 government-funded—and often church-affiliated—Indian Boarding schools across the U.S. in the twentieth century.”¹³³

¹²⁷ Zuver, Paul E. *A Short History of Carlisle Barracks*. No publisher given. 1934.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 129

¹²⁹ Reaser, Clarence L. "Richard Henry Pratt: The Red Man's Solomon, and His Experiment in Indian Education." *US Army War College*, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1975, pp. 1–25, p. 18.

¹³⁰ Malmsheimer, Lonna M. "'Imitation White Man': Images of Transformation at the Carlisle Indian School." *Studies in Visual Communication*, UPenn, 2017, pp. 54–75.

¹³¹ Laurence, Robert. "Indian education: Federal compulsory school attendance law applicable to American Indians: The treaty-making period: 1857-1871." *Am. Indian L. Rev.* vol. 5, 1977, pp. 393–413.

¹³² Ewing 2025, p. 90

¹³³ Retrieved from: <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/us-indian-boarding-school-history/>.

With the goal of “civilizing” Black and Native youth, expectations of what success looked like and, therefore, the curriculum itself, were shaped by racist ideologies. Philosopher Derrick Darby and education scholar John L. Rury contend that “Black intellectual inferiority is built into the system of American thought.”¹³⁴ Through them, Ewing argues “that the same historical record demonstrates the presumed innate intellectual inferiority of Native people as well, and that understanding these presumptions side by side is essential to drawing a fuller portrait of what Americans think ‘intelligence’ even is.”¹³⁵ Much like segregated Black schools taught youth to be good servants and know their place in society, Estelle Reel, superintendent of the Indian Schools from 1898 to 1910, developed “what she called the ‘Uniform Course of Study,’ a curriculum to be used in all federally run Indian schools and designed to meet the needs of what she believed to be the intellectually inferior Indian child.”¹³⁶

Throughout the next twenty years, scientists and scholars continued to investigate how intelligence was measured and how best to educate American youth. In reality, they were searching for ways that Black and Native intelligence could be scientifically proven to be at a lower standard. While many tests were administered, the findings were not broadly used until Princeton psychology professor Carl Brigham published his 1923 book *A Study of American Intelligence*.¹³⁷ In it, he relayed his findings that would soon turn into what he called the Scholastic Aptitude Test—the SATs. Even through the 1990s as Ewing has traced, when the test’s annual “experimental” questions—a selection of items included each year on a trial basis, to be analyzed and potentially included in future iterations of the test—resulted

¹³⁴ Darby, Derrick, and John L. Rury. *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice*. The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

¹³⁵ Ewing 2025, p. 99

¹³⁶ Ewing 2025, p. 113

¹³⁷ Brigham, Carl Campbell. *A Study of American Intelligence*. Princeton University Press, 1923.

in Black students doing better than White students, the questions were thrown out. The logic, guided by the unquestioned gospel of intellectual inferiority, was that if Black students performed better on an item, the question must be inherently flawed.¹³⁸

As she goes on to write, “part of the gospel of intellectual inferiority is the assumption that only White people’s knowledge is worth knowing—indeed, that only White people’s knowledge *counts* as knowledge at all.”¹³⁹

While this history is brief, I owe much gratitude to Eve Ewing for her scholarship and advocacy.¹⁴⁰ The creation story of Black/Native solidarity started in proximity, but this section tells a middle period of disconnect between Black folks and Natives. Because of the ways the curriculum erased cultural and ancestral knowledge, parallel trajectories began to form in the mid-1900s, after the Great Migration and the rise of Urban Natives. Cities, then, were the focal point for these solidarities and shaped both the Black Power Movement and the Red Power Movement. Furthermore, proximity enabled the Red Power Movement to be inspired by the Black Power Movement.

Contemporary (Re)Urbanization and the Civil Rights Era

The idea that Natives and Black folks did not have urban centers is yet another part of the creation story of colonization to further the justification to “civilize.” While pre-colonial Africa had cities and urban areas, the Americas also had complex urban infrastructure.¹⁴¹ At

¹³⁸ Ewing 2025, p. 127

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 141

¹⁴⁰ This is nuanced and I do not mean to just parrot Ewing’s arguments. I had already done much research into this, only for Ewing’s book to come out where she connects things in a brilliant way. Once her book was out, I had to cite her, so this section is a mix of the research I had already done and Ewing’s synthesis. I owe her and respect her work so much, and merely want to use the 7 pages of this subsection to ground the rest of this chapter and much of my second chapter.

¹⁴¹ DuVal, Kathleen. *Native Nations: A Millennium in North America*. Random House, 2025.
Mann, Charles C. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. Knopf, 2005.

the time of the colonial encounter, Tenochtitlan was the largest city in North America, home to floating gardens, a robust trading infrastructure for its roughly 300,000 residents, and technological/architectural marvels.¹⁴² In what is modern-day St. Louis, however, there once was also a city that rivaled it called Cahokia.¹⁴³ Even on a smaller scale, Nations such as the Pueblo had urban areas with complex cliff dwellings.¹⁴⁴ After almost four hundred years of colonization and the ruralization implemented by both the plantations and the reservation system, the re-urbanization of settler cities by Natives and Black folks is where the proximity of Black/Native solidarity continues. As this history unfolds, it is clear that the Black Power Movement inspired the Red Power Movement.

As I argued earlier, the uninhabitable is a geographic arrangement that fuels technologies of settler maintenance, representing spaces defined by the lack of access to rights, knowledge, wealth, and visibility. I define urban not just in terms of the rural/urban binary, but as a place of connectivity through relations. The urban is a community center—whether in a mainstream definition of urban or not—that has built ecologies of futures. The urban is the place where knowledge is shared and coalitions are built, in opposition to the settler creation story. The settler story starts at a time when Black folks and Natives were already in their “rural” geographic arrangements of removal—and subsequently reservations—and plantations. As cities have grown over time, there has been

¹⁴² Núñez-González, María, and Pilar Moya-Olmedo. “When an Urban Layout Unified the World: From Tenochtitlan to the City of Mexico—The Emergence of a New Urban Model in the Early Modern Era.” *Histories*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2025, pp. 53–80.

¹⁴³ Alt, Sarah M. *Cahokia’s Complexities : Ceremonies and Politics of the First Mississippian Farmers*. University Alabama Press, 2018.

Romain, William Francis. “Archaeoastronomy and Landscape Archaeology at Cahokia.” *Journal of Astronomy in Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–59.

¹⁴⁴ Palonka, Radosław, et al. “Inventory and Digital Documentation for Uncovering the Hidden Secrets of Pre-Hispanic Heritage Sites – An Example of Ancestral Pueblo Community from the Mesa Verde Region, Southwestern Colorado, USA.” *Digital Applications in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, vol. 28, 2023.

a racialization of the term “urban.”¹⁴⁵ As I move through this section, I utilize “cities” to talk about spaces where movements and people come together due to forced settler ideology, such as the Urban Indian Relocation Program, or the economic and racial conditions of the South, which prompted the Great Black Migration. There was, however, the urban long before the rise of U.S. cities, and so to think of the (re)urbanization of cities by Natives and Black folks punctures the settler creation story. The (re)urbanization of cities, therefore, is naming the process of breaking these forced settler geographies and containments, through practices such as redlining that defined segregation in many U.S. cities, to once again share knowledge and build coalitions.

The root of both the Great Black Migration and rise of Urban Natives in the U.S. began around World War I.¹⁴⁶ While it is commonly known that around six million Black folks migrated between 1917 and 1970, “fewer than 10,000 American Indians lived in cities in 1926” but by “1960, this number had risen to about 160,000, and by 1970, it had risen to 340,000.”¹⁴⁷ Part of the slow, then sudden, increase in migration was due to a number of policies enacted by Congress. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act was passed, which, in theory, returned to Nations the ability to self-govern. The act was framed in the context that Nations were still under government jurisdiction, which undermined any possibility of

¹⁴⁵ Neely, Brooke and Michelle Samura. “Social Geographies of Race: Connecting Race and Space.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, no. 11, 2011, pp. 1933–1952.

Lipsitz, George. “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape.” *Landscape Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2007, pp. 10–23.

¹⁴⁶ Reich, Steve A. *The Great Black Migration : A Historical Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*. Greenwood, 2014.

¹⁴⁷ Snipp, C. Matthew. “Changing Numbers, Changing Needs: American Indian Demography and Public Health.” *National Academy of Sciences*, 1996.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK233098/#:~:text=The%20impacts%20of%20participation%20in,numbers%20concentrated%20in%20rural%20areas.>

sovereignty, leading 178 Nations to vote in favor and 78 to vote against.¹⁴⁸ It was at this time that most Tribal Governments—as we know them today—were created.¹⁴⁹

Almost twenty years later, House Resolution No. 108 83rd Congress was passed on August 1, 1953. While proposed through the guise of liberating Natives from federal control, the bill actually called for the termination of the “special status” of Natives, which previously acknowledged Nations as their own entities.¹⁵⁰ Embedded within this bill was the legal response to the Urban Indian Relocation Program, which was formed just months prior in 1952, calling for Natives to move to cities to weaken and disperse communities on Tribal land. It is here, then, between 1952 and 1970, that the vast majority of Natives migrated to urban areas. While the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) “pledged assistance with locating housing and employment,” many Natives struggled just to survive, including having severe impacts on their mental health and feelings of disconnection from their Nations.¹⁵¹ Cities—such as Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, and others—were promoted by the BIA for relocation.

¹⁴⁸ Shreve, Bradley Glenn. *Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2011, p. 25.

¹⁴⁹ Unknown author. “A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: The Self-Government Era (1934-1953).” *Howard University School of Law*. Retrieved from: <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/indigenous/selfgovernment>.

¹⁵⁰ Unknown author. “A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: The Termination Era (1953-1968).” *Howard University School of Law*. Retrieved from: <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/indigenous/termination>.

¹⁵¹ Unknown author. “Native American Urban Relocation.” *National Archives*. Retrieved from: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/indian-relocation.html>.



Figure 4: Field Office Poster-Chicagoland, Chicago Field Office Employment Assistance Case Files, 1952-1960, Record Group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Within the first eight years of the Urban Indian Relocation Program, many Natives were exposed to the early work of the Civil Rights Era. 1954, of course, saw *Brown v. Board of Education*, while a few years later, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was passed.¹⁵² Many activist groups also formed in the 50s, such as the Young Lords Organization, a Puerto Rican group founded in Chicago by José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez.¹⁵³ Throughout the 50s, the Nation of Islam gained traction, and Malcolm X became its main spokesperson.¹⁵⁴ In 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed by Black student activists.¹⁵⁵ Chicago, as a city of Civil Rights protests, is an important part of the creation

¹⁵² Green, Kayla Griffin. “Education’s Inextricable Ties to Democracy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and Its Democratic Aspirations.” *Cleveland State Law Review*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–10.

Watson, Denton L. *The Papers of Clarence Mitchell Jr. Volume 5: The Struggle to Pass the 1957 Civil Rights Act, 1955–1958*. Ohio University Press, 2021.

¹⁵³ Fernández, Johanna. *The Young Lords : A Radical History*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ McDuffie, Erik S. “Message to the Grass Roots: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Early Black Power.” In McDuffie, Erik S. *The Second Battle for Africa Garveyism, the US Heartland, and Global Black Freedom*. Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 215–242.

Varda, Scott. “Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam: Rhetorical Tactics in the First Dozen Years.” In Evans, Robert C. ed. *Malcolm X*. Salem Press, 2020, pp. 3–19.

¹⁵⁵ Robnett, Belinda. “Women in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee: Ideology, Organizational Structure, and Leadership.” In Ling, Peter J. and Monteith, Sharon. *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*. Routledge, 1999, pp. 131–168.

story for Black/Native solidarity, but so too is the connection between Chicago and New Mexico.

With an influx of Natives being relocated to urban environments, many Indian Centers were founded to foster community, provide guidance and support to Urban Natives, and serve them through education.¹⁵⁶ While the American Indian Center of Chicago—one of the first Urban Native centers in the U.S.—was founded in 1953, the Urban Native population of Chicago continued to grow and exchange ideas with Chicago activists throughout the 1950s.¹⁵⁷ Simultaneously at the University of New Mexico, the first “Indian Club” was formed to give Native students a space to practice their cultural heritage.¹⁵⁸ Two other critical groups were formed by 1956—the first being the Southwestern Association for American Indian Affairs (SWAAIA), which, under Charles Minton, also founded the Southwestern Regional Indian Youth Council (SRIYC), and the second being the Workshop on American Indian Affairs for Native Students (WAIANS).¹⁵⁹ As education scholar M. Nathan Tanner describes,

Unlike the SRIYC conferences that invited all Indigenous youth who were able to attend, however, WAIANS events were intended to enroll only a handful of the most academically accomplished Indigenous students. WAIANS provided an “elite experience” to those accepted, where Indigenous youth learned anthropological and sociological theories and

Williams, Yohuru R. “American Exported Black Nationalism: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, and the Worldwide Freedom Struggle, 1967-1972.” *Negro History Bulletin*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1997, pp. 13–20.

¹⁵⁶ Shotton, Heather J., Star Yellowfish and Rosa Cintrón. “Island of Sanctuary: The Role of an American Indian Culture Center.” Patton, Lori D. ed. *Culture Centers in Higher Education Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice*. Routledge, 2011, pp. 49–62.

¹⁵⁷ Unknown author. “About Us.” *American Indian Center Chicago*. <https://aicchicago.org/about-us/>.

Arndt, Grant. “‘Contrary to Our Way of Thinking’: The Struggle for an American Indian Center in Chicago, 1946-1953.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1998, pp. 117–134.

¹⁵⁸ Tanner, M. Nathan. “Resisting Termination: Native American College Student Activism and the National Indian Youth Council, 1953-1970.” *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 65, 2025, pp. 245–274, p. 254.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 255

developed capacity for cultural analysis and critique among leading academicians and Indigenous leaders within the NCAI [National Congress of American Indians].¹⁶⁰

Over the next five years, workshops and meetings were held in which Native youth discussed the future of Native life, both rural and urban.

Especially in response to the termination of Tribal Government and the coerced relocation of the last decade, Chicago Natives from the American Indian Center of Chicago, along with larger organizations such as the NCAI, organized the American Indian Chicago Conference (AICC), held at the University of Chicago from June 13 to June 20, 1961.¹⁶¹ Over the course of the eight days held at Mandel Hall, it was clear that many attendees had differing views. While 460 Natives from 90 Nations attended, it was still only a fraction of the almost three hundred federally recognized Nations in 1960.¹⁶² Not only did every Nation have its own history that informed its representatives, but non-Native academic and founder of action anthropology, Sol Tax, was one of the co-organizers and led many of the proceedings.¹⁶³ In addition to non-Native voices taking up space at this conference, many youth in attendance left thinking that some of the Tribal leaders were corrupt and not taking enough action to fight for sovereignty adequately.

Among the youths were several students who formed a working group and came prepared, having read through all the pre-conference materials. As Tanner writes,

For the twelve Indigenous college students who formed the youth caucus, the AICC essentially represented a culmination of their collective Indian club and workshop experiences; they were determined to lead a movement for Indigenous self-determination

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 256

¹⁶¹ Unknown author. *Declaration of Indian Purpose: The Voice of the American Indian. Proceedings of American Indian Chicago Conference (University of Chicago, June 13-20, 1961)*. July 14, 1961.

¹⁶² Lurie, Nancy Oestreich. "The Voice of the American Indian: Report on the American Indian Chicago Conference." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1961, pp. 478-500, p. 498.

¹⁶³ Ibid

and sovereignty independent of their elders and without any white supervision or assistance.¹⁶⁴

Ultimately, “they wanted freedom, the kind ‘the civil rights movement’ was promising to African Americans and other racially and politically marginalized peoples.”¹⁶⁵ Put into motion by a letter that Mohawk student Shirley Witt wrote to Walker River Paiute student Melvin Thom the day after AICC ended, these students stayed in touch all summer, working towards a meeting in Gallup, NM, from August 10 to August 11, 1961.¹⁶⁶ It was that weekend, nestled between the Zuni and Navajo Reservations, that they decided to drop the “Southwestern Regional” and call themselves the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), thus creating the Red Power Movement.¹⁶⁷

The 1960s also saw an influx of Black educators to Indian Boarding schools, especially in the Southwest.¹⁶⁸ As Black studies scholar Khalil Anthony Johnson Jr. explains, “between 1954 and 1974, southern resistance to desegregation displaced an estimated forty thousand African Americans from teaching positions.”¹⁶⁹ By the mid 1960s, “the number of Black BIA employees in New Mexico and Arizona had increased to 209.”¹⁷⁰ A percentage of the Southwest Native youth in the ‘60s being educated by Black teachers undoubtedly had a critical impact on the legacy of the Red Power Movement.

It is no coincidence, then, that the SNCC and the NIYC both centered youth organizing and, ultimately, were the ones to publicize the use of “power.” Led by—at the

¹⁶⁴ Tanner 2025, p. 257

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 257

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 258

¹⁶⁷ Shreve 2011, p. 93

¹⁶⁸ Johnson Jr., Khalil Anthony. “‘Recruited to Teach the Indians’: An African American Genealogy of Navajo Nation Boarding Schools.” *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2018, pp. 154–176.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 169

¹⁷⁰ Shreve 2011, p. 169

time—Stokely Carmichael, the SNCC officially named their fight for Black Power at a march in Mississippi during 1966.¹⁷¹ It was this same year that NIYC leaders officially began using the term Red Power themselves.¹⁷² While the SNCC started its decline as an official organization in 1969, the Black Panther Party had already been founded in 1966.¹⁷³ The NIYC also shifted its goals and, in 1968, formed the Red Power Party, sparking a parallel group that would later become the American Indian Movement (AIM). For the Black Panthers, 1969 saw the Free Breakfast Program, the opening of their first Liberation School called the Intercommunal Youth Institute, and the murder of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. For the Red Power Movement, the San Francisco Indian Center “mysteriously” burned to the ground in October 1969 as one of the urban centers for Native activism.¹⁷⁴ From 1969 to 1973, AIM conducted five major occupations—Alcatraz in 1969, the Mayflower II in Boston in 1970, Mount Rushmore in 1971, the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972, and finally Wounded Knee in 1973.¹⁷⁵ The Red Power Movement even started its own publication called *Americans Before Columbus*, much like the Black Panthers’ newspaper (the NIYC in fact also had their own newsletter that hundreds of Tribes subscribed to).¹⁷⁶ Reflecting the initial alternate path away from the old Tribal leaders at the AICC, managing editor of the *Tribal College Journal* Bradley G. Shreve notes, “the students who launched the Red Power

¹⁷¹ Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power*. Vol. 48. New York: Random House, 1967. Hall, Simon. “The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966–1969.” *The Historian*, vol 69, no. 1, 2007, pp. 49–82.

¹⁷² Nagel, Joane. *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹⁷³ Dong, Cheryl X. “Revolutionary History: Rethinking Black Panther Party Initiatives at Public History, 1966–1979.” *Public Historian*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2025, pp. 40–66.

¹⁷⁴ Shreve 2011, p. 183

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 184

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 209

movement were both men *and* women.”¹⁷⁷ Critically, despite their names being mostly unknown, the Black Panther Party also had around 60% of its members being women.¹⁷⁸

If the 1960s saw the creation of Black/Native solidarity through shared activist ideologies, community projects, education, and the dissemination of information, the 1970s highlighted a more direct line, with leaders once again occupying shared spaces. In 1973, AIM leaders “sieged Wounded Knee, South Dakota for seventy-one-days.”¹⁷⁹ A year after the occupation of Wounded Knee, AIM members were on trial for this siege.¹⁸⁰ In the midst of deliberation, Carmichael attended an AIM chapter meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota.¹⁸¹ Black and Saginaw Chippewa historian Kyle T. Mays and historian Sam Hitchmough recount his speech that day.

Speaking in front of the AIM meeting, Stokely Carmichael began his analysis with land.

Basing his argument from the analysis of Malcolm X, who argued that land was central to all revolutions, Carmichael contended, “if you do not own land or control land you will be under the power of he who does own and control land.” He further argued “if you don’t own land you cannot have a nation.” It is important to note that while he used a materialist notion of land, he was not speaking solely of owning property; his understanding of land was more in line with Indigenous peoples who understood the spiritual element of land. He opined that “the land of the black man is Africa. That is his land. That is what he is struggling for in America.” He was quick to note, though, that the land under U.S. occupation “belongs to the red man” and their struggle is for their land and it “can only be his land.” Importantly,

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 208

¹⁷⁸ Shames, Stephen, and Ericka Huggins. *Comrade Sisters: Women of the Black Panther Party*. ACC Art Books, 2022.

¹⁷⁹ Mays, Kyle T. “The Forgotten History of Solidarity between Black and Indigenous Freedom Movements.” *IWB21*, October 6, 2021.

<https://ibw21.org/editors-choice/the-forgotten-history-of-solidarity-between-black-and-indigenous-freedom-movements/>.

¹⁸⁰ Hitchmough, Sam, and Kyle T. Mays. *Rethinking the Red Power Movement*. Routledge, 2024.

¹⁸¹ Ibid

Carmichael also argued that Black people should appreciate Indigenous people's history.

"Those who say they support the red man must support him and urge him toward his nationalism and toward its interpretation of history." Carmichael argued that non-Indigenous allies must accept Indigenous history and use that as a basis for the future.¹⁸²

Also in 1974, the leader of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown, stated that "not only did they come here and rip off this country from the Indian people, they also ripped off our territory and brought us here to work for them."¹⁸³ The acknowledgement of land and the entwined history of removal were key to early solidarity-building. Finally, built off the Liberation School model, 1974 was also the year that Native American Educational Services (NAES) College was founded in Chicago, the only Native-run university not on Tribal land at the time.

While this history is consolidated, it shows the regained proximity of Black/Native solidarity through the migration to urban environments and the actions of the Civil Rights Era. The (re)urbanization of cities and the "urban" itself deconstruct the very settler geographies created to maintain colonial narratives. As I have shown so far, however, I acknowledge and do not discount the ever-present anti-Blackness in Native communities or the prejudice against Natives that is present in some Black communities. However, I am focused on how communities come together to continue fighting colonization and the infrastructure that settlers have put in place. This is the creation story that I wish to tell in this dissertation.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 73

¹⁸³ Carmichael, Stokely. *Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism*. Chicago, Chicago Review Press, 2007, p. 200.

Consciousness and Coalition-Building through Hip Hop

In 1988, then seventeen-year-old Tupac Shakur quit his job flipping pizzas because his boss refused to let him leave early to participate in a recorded interview at Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley, California. Still a minor, he had his mother, Afeni Shakur—a member of the Black Panthers—sign his release form, and he showed up for his conversation.

My mother taught me three things. Respect, knowledge—search for knowledge, it's an eternal journey...and to not be quiet...I think we got so caught up in school being a tradition, that we stopped using it as a learning tool...I think there should be a different curriculum in each and every neighborhood...I'm going to Tamalpais High and I'm learning about the basics, but they're not basic for me, you know? And it's like they're not—to get us ready for today's world, that's not helping. It's just what they [the creators of curriculum] took so it's what we're going to take, you know? And that's why the streets have taught me...There should be a drug class, there should be sex education, there should be a class on scams, there should be a class on religious cults, there should be a class on police brutality, there should be a class on apartheid, there should be a class on racism in America, there should be a class on why people are hungry, but there's not. There's classes on gym...They should be teaching you English and then teach you to understand double talk, politician's double talk...Ancient civilizations have survived without going to schools like that. They've learned from their parents. We're not being taught to deal with the world as it is. We're being taught to deal with this fairyland, which we're not even living in anymore...More kids are being handed crack than being handed diplomas...What we're doing is starting the Black Panthers again...first teaching pride and then education.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ 2Pac Tribute. "2Pac at age 17 - Full interview from 1988." n.d.
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3rt5me>.

Shakur powerfully highlights the need to return to community-based knowledge systems. As Mays writes, by 1991, “the US government had decimated Black and Indigenous movements with killings, infiltration, exile, and imprisonment.”¹⁸⁵ For example, while the Black community organized the L.A. rebellion of 1992 for the Black community, the Native community reinstated the AIM Patrol after police violence in areas such as Minneapolis. Mays and Hitchmough point out that, as “the child of Black Panther Party member Afeni Shakur, [Tupac Shakur] was raised within a revolutionary family who loved Black people and all oppressed people.”¹⁸⁶ Rooted in the Black Power Movement, Tupac was building a revolutionary Black consciousness through his worldview, including building coalitions. Mays and Hitchmough alternatively present current rapper Nataanii Means as an example of someone having direct ties to the Red Power Movement through his grandfather, Russell Means, who was a leader among AIM.¹⁸⁷ While Nataanii is tied to the Red Power Movement, I contend that we should, in fact, first look to Russell Means himself.

During the same time that Tupac was making hip hop records steeped in the Black Power tradition throughout the early 90s, Russell Means released two records that were a mix of hip hop and many other musical influences. In 1993, he released *Electric Warrior* on Warrior Records, and in 1995, *The Radical* on the American Indian Music Company Inc. He was inducted into the Native American Music Awards Hall of Fame in 2013, a year after his death.¹⁸⁸ The Nataanii Means’ track, which Mays and Hitchmough speak of, “The Radical,” is, in fact, paying homage to his grandfather’s hip hop record almost twenty years earlier. In

¹⁸⁵ Mays 2021

¹⁸⁶ Hitchmough and Mays 2024, p. 136

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 129-130

¹⁸⁸ Unknown author. “Russell Means to enter Native American Music Awards Hall.” *Cherokee Phoenix*, May 2, 2013.

https://www.cherokeephox.org/culture/russell-means-to-enter-native-american-music-awards-hall/article_7155f86b-94bd-5789-9d84-4206444ebe8f.html.

the music video for “The Radical” between 2:22 and 3:01, Nataanii embeds footage of his grandfather talking about what it means to be a radical.¹⁸⁹ At the end of his first verse, he raps

I wear my hair proud, this is true pride music

war hoopin’ loud equivalent to the American Indian Movement.¹⁹⁰

Critically, Nataanii draws a parallel between AIM and his hip hop music, weaving in his own familial history, as his grandfather was part of all five AIM occupations between 1969 and 1973. With Black Power, Red Power, and the coalitions they both built, rooted in hip hop culture, it is important to understand how hip hop traveled between Black and Native spaces. Regarding education and schooling, it is critical that hip hop serves as an alternative way of passing knowledge when the settler curriculum was aimed at failing Black and Native youth. As Tupac said, the streets and his mother taught him more than the education system ever did.

Common to hip hop knowledge is the fact that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were among the first hip hop groups to emerge from the Bronx in 1978. What is less known, however, is that Grandmaster Melle Mel (of the Furious Five) was half Black and half Cherokee.¹⁹¹ While Natives were consuming hip hop and contributing through other pillars (bboy/bgirl, graffiti, low rider culture), the first Native rappers to hit the scene were Chichimeca and Cherokee rapper Litefoot out of the greater Los Angeles area and the group WithOut Rezervations (also known as W.O.R.) from the Bay Area, who both had releases in

¹⁸⁹ Nataanii Means. “Nataanii Means- The Radical (ft. Russell Means).” *YouTube*, Jan 25, 2014. <https://youtu.be/pW7cLgozECc?si=BChhxHHIgNk6bQjH>.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 1:06

¹⁹¹ The common discourse is Cherokee, however, a good number of people say he is Shinnecock. For Cherokee: Harmsen, Natalie. “How Black and Indigenous communities have connected through rap: Shad, DJ Shub and Mamarudegyal MTHC weigh in on the shared musical history.” *CBC Music*, July 20, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/music/shad-dj-shub-mamarudegyal-interviews-collaboration-hip-hop-1.6911489>.

1988.¹⁹² Litefoot's first full length debut *The Money EP* was in 1992, which he released on his own record label, Red Vinyl Records. It was also 1992 that WithOut Rezervations released a three track EP which included tracks such "Red, White and Blue" and "Was He A Fool? (Columbus)."¹⁹³ That same year W.O.R. "was approached by Canyon Records¹⁹⁴ to produce a recording that would within two years become the now infamous national debut recording *Are You Ready For W.O.R.?...becom[ing]* the first Native Hip Hop group to release a work on a major label" in 1994.¹⁹⁵

On a similar timeline, Aztlan Underground, a Los Angeles-based group, first started making music in 1989. Rooted in the Indígena Mexican perspective, their songs challenged the Mexican, Hispanic, mestizo/a, and Latino/a colonial labels. They released their first full-length album, *Decolonize*, in 1995 under their self-created label Xican@ Records and Film. On it was their biggest hit titled "Indígena." On the hook, they rap

Indigenous, yeah you don't even know
yes indígena, and you don't even know
Not mestizo, latino, or a gringo
but Indigenous, yeah you don't even know.¹⁹⁶

1995 also saw the creation of the Cree hip hop group War Party from Maskwacis, Alberta. Performing the underground circuit for years honed their skills, only to win the "Best Rap Album" at the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards for their debut release, *The Reign*, in 2000. Finally, although not a fully Native hip hop group, will.i.am and Dakota Sioux,

¹⁹² Lechusza 2009, p. 39

¹⁹³ "Red, White and Blue" can be heard at: <https://youtu.be/Tzw0AeKtVcc?si=hM0DV77vV5mdktG3>.

¹⁹⁴ Founded in 1951, Canyon Records is one of the oldest Native-owned record labels in the United States.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 40

¹⁹⁶ Aztlan Underground. "Aztlan Underground - Indigena (Official Video)." *YouTube*. May 3, 2021. <https://youtu.be/DZTmWj2pQJE?si=l6GaAYrX6JNnjZgE>.

Shoshone, and Mexican rapper Taboo started the Black Eyed Peas in 1995. While their rise to stardom has been well documented, Taboo has served (and continues to serve) as an inspiration to young Native hip hop artists.

The '90s influenced many young Natives, including Apsáalooke rapper Supaman. In a 2018 interview, he explains that “what those rappers were saying was...the voice of the oppressed...what they were talking about was what we as Natives...go through.”¹⁹⁷ As a kid, Supaman was inspired by Litefoot, which led him to learn how to DJ, and in 1999, he got the chance to tour with Litefoot. In 2003, he started the group Rezawrecktion, and their first album, *It's Time* (2005), won a Native American Music Award. After Rezawrecktion disbanded, he began to define his personal style. As a fancy dancer at powwows, Supaman began wearing his regalia, playing the flute, and creating beats that tied his Indigeneity to hip hop. Since starting his solo career, he has continued to build tracks and performances through live looping. In 2017, Supaman was featured on Taboo's "Stand Up / Stand N Rock #NoDAPL," which was voted Best Video with a Social Message at the MTV Video Music Awards.

Outside North America, hip hop's influence was felt worldwide. For example, the Greenlandic Inuit group Nuuk Posse, formed in 1985, was the first to rap in Kalaallisut and released its first official music video in 1992 with “Qitik” (meaning sharp). Native Ryme Syndicate, a Native group from Australia, was formed in 1994, but the underground scene dates back to the 1980s. While the rise of Native hip hop in mainstream musical outlets and popular media has garnered recent attention in the last decade, global Native hip hop spanning from Greenland to New Zealand has a long and deep-seated lineage, which

¹⁹⁷ Apsáalooke is the Indigenous name for the Crow Nation of Montana. The interview can be found here: <https://youtu.be/TwpgBC9FrTk>.

current rappers are drawing on, having conversations with across space and time, and are citing in their own music-making processes.

Another instrumental figure in early hip hop culture was Cree photographer Ernie Paniccioli. Growing up in New York City, Paniccioli first began photographing the graffiti of the early 1970s, subsequently capturing decades of history across the pillars of hip hop. For all his documentation and the way he “captur[ed] people and communities ignored or misunderstood by mainstream America,” he was inducted into the Hip Hop Hall of Fame in 2014.¹⁹⁸ In a conversation I had with Def-i, he explained his relationship to hip hop history, especially to Ernie Paniccioli.

I was a part of this cool panel at the Zulu Nation 30th Anniversary there. And I shared a bit about, like, how we definitely acknowledged that hip hop was coined at this time in the Bronx, New York, but it is a continuation of all different cultures coming together, especially Black, Latino, but also Indigenous too. And there's a lot of influence in that, if you look at just the dance, the rap, the drum. I think Ernie Paniccioli said something that I really agreed on. But what he was talking about was hip hop and how it related to him, and as a Native, I really resonate with too, and think of like as the drummer being the DJ, the storyteller being the MC, and things like that, really like sparked off in my mind at a younger age. And to hear an elder, a hip hop elder, who was around affirmed that for me. It gave me more sense of pride in being Native and like realizing that this is like ancient too. It's not just only from this recent time, you know, like fifty years or so ago.¹⁹⁹

Viewing Native hip hop as a relation exemplifies the solidarities that are built. While this chapter has been rooted in the histories of Black/Native solidarity and the creation story of Native hip hop, I now turn to how it is furthered in the current moment.

¹⁹⁸ Paniccioli, Ernie. *Ernie Paniccioli*. N.d. <https://www.erniepaniccioli.com/about>.

¹⁹⁹ Def-i, personal communication, February 28, 2024

“The Natives Remain Cool Like Dat”: From Urban to Rural and Back

“Yo, I wasn’t sure if you were coming in today or tomorrow!” Def-i said over the phone. Ten minutes later, he rolled by my Albuquerque Airbnb, and we were headed to hang with Myka 9, A-F-R-O, and Benny Browncoat. Def-i was not performing, but he wanted to take me to the Rock the “Block” fest, presented by DoLoMyte Sounds, Mothership Alumni, and Hip-Hop As A Weapon. The night also featured DJ Babu and Rakaa of the legendary hip hop trio Dilated Peoples. We rolled up before Myka 9 and A-F-R-O went on, and Def-i parked his car a few blocks away as 4th Street was blocked off between Central Ave and Gold Ave. As we rolled up, Def-i dapped up one of the security guards, taking us to Myka 9’s ride, which was parked on the side of the street. In his 50s now, Myka 9 is still on the underground hip hop circuit and driving his own tour van, graffiti’d on the outside and decked out with beds and a plethora of hip hop history. Def-i introduced me to everyone, and then we kicked it for a while. Everyone was passing a blunt around and listening to Myka 9’s stories of hip hop history, like his time in MC Aces with Aceyalone, as well as ghost writing “Scream” off of N.W.A.’s debut 1987 album *N.W.A. and the Posse*.

As Def-i kept saying to me, Myka 9 is the “triple OG” and one of Def-i’s biggest inspirations. Myka 9 gave Def-i opportunities in L.A. and built a community. His first encounter with Myka 9 was when Def-i came to Albuquerque from the Rez for a show. Afterwards, Def-i went up to meet Myka 9. Myka 9 looked at the then-teenage Def-i and said, “Spit me something,” and their relationship grew from there. Since the ‘90s, Myka 9 has been touring the Rez, introducing Native youth to hip hop and inspiring those already in the scene. A-F-R-O has also done the same, working with Def-i and the Diné people. Just

around the corner from where Rock the Block fest was being held, there is a spot called Echoes where Def-i started a monthly First Fridays event almost twenty years ago. The hip hop scene was small back then, but he slowly built it up through open mics and by bringing in touring acts. Although it is still largely underground, the Albuquerque/Santa Fe area now hosts hip hop legends.

That same night, Dignable Planets was headlining a free festival in Santa Fe. Beatboxer Lady Say What (part of Def-i's 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour, which I will discuss in chapter two) and Taos Pueblo rapper B3ar MC were opening, so we said goodbye to the crew and started the hour-long drive to Santa Fe. Around halfway there, we stopped at a rest stop, and Def-i asked the person at the counter if he could put up a flyer for the next event he was organizing, called Grand Exit 5 in Santa Fe (part of the SWAIA's Santa Fe Indian Market that I will discuss in chapter four). They happily agreed, so he grabbed a flyer and taped it to the entrance glass door. We were off again.

The event was hosted by Lensic 360 and was at the Santa Fe Railyard, an energetic area of restaurants, breweries, and other local businesses. The stage was built right in front of the train tracks. As we parked in Tomasita's (a New Mexican cuisine restaurant) parking lot, it started to pour. Because of the rain, we soon found out the show had been postponed, and because of Tomasita's proximity to the stage, it was packed with people eating dinner and waiting out the storm. We walked in, but after hearing about a two-hour wait, we decided to order takeout. We were standing under an awning when a woman approached and asked, "Are you Def-i?" She and her daughter had come to Santa Fe for the show, but she had been following him on social media for years now and was a big fan. "Are you performing tonight too?" she asked hopefully. "Nah, I'm just a hip hop head myself tonight,"

he replied. He gave her some stickers for her daughter, and she thanked him, then hugged him as she left with her food. After only 20 minutes, we also picked up our food and walked back to his car to eat.

After eating, the rain had pretty much stopped, so we walked along the train platform toward the stage, only to see more homies and fans alike. Def-i has truly built a hip hop community in the Albuquerque/Santa Fe area, and it was beautiful to see all the love. We even met a bgirl who had trained with some Olympians. Unfortunately, due to city sound curfew rules, the festival announced that they only had time for Diggable Planets to perform their 90-minute set. Def-i and I had been excited to see Lady Say What and B3ar MC, but thankfully, I had the chance to see them again. While Diggable Planets were getting set up, the three of us went to grab coffee from La Lecheria on Market Street.

Diggable Planets' set was incredible and completely live with a drummer and sax player. Early in the set they performed "Black Ego" where they rap

My shit's a natural high, the man can't put no thing on me
so dig me when my mind stretch out, it's astro Black
time reaching into end, nappy Afro blue
I swoop, out and inside the corners
do my tha-a-ang like Huey with it.

Later, they performed "Dog It."

Fro soul gold Panther crew grab our poppers
now, I'm making bacon, still saying wa as-salamu alaykum
I raise everyday for the mass
tote my fist right up right against the fascist
descend to my borough digs my diction

it's way on time Fossil watch fifth line still shining
I'm left this year I'm not a player
in my vein lives bell hooks Derrick Bell, Reggie Butler
see Marvin knew it, and Sly knew it
Cube know it and now we do it outta Brooklyn.

Throughout their performance, there were so many references to the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, and Black Power. In between songs, about halfway through their set, Ladybug got on the mic and said, “This is Native land, y’all,” and the whole crowd of mostly Natives erupted in cheers, viscerally drawing on the history of Black/Native solidarity. After building anticipation all night, they ended the show with “Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat).” The lights went down as they walked off the stage to cheers and applause. The MC of the night said that there were after-parties at two different breweries with local Native DJs, so we walked over to Nuckolls Brewing Co., where Native graffiti artists were tagging what read, “The Natives Remain...Cool Like Dat.”



Figure 5: Image taken by author of the graffiti reading, “The Natives Remain...Cool Like Dat” at the Santa Fe Railyard on August 9, 2024.



Figure 6: Image taken by author of the graffiti reading, “The Natives Remain...Cool Like Dat” at the Santa Fe Railyard on August 9, 2024.

After a bunch of other folks came up to Def-i to say hello, we got back to his car and started the ride home, all while talking about hip hop. Not just to quote a Lupe Fiasco song, but he said how hip hop really did save his life. The community he has built and the found family he has cultivated through his craft have brought him so much purpose and drive to give back, especially the youth on the Rez.

While Def-i gives so much to his Diné community, he also mentors others trying to get into the scene, giving them opportunities to collaborate and perform. As I show in chapter two, Def-i’s mentorship takes the form of his 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour, which conducts week-long workshops in reservation schools. These residencies draw on the history of the National Indian Youth Council’s impact on the Southwest, especially the week he spent in Gallup, NM. Another example of the way he gives back is his mentorship of

the rising Yavapai-Apache hip hop artist A\$h Da Hunter. In a conversation with A\$h, she spoke to me about her journey to hip hop, especially how prevalent it was on her Rez when she was growing up.

I've always been kind of, like, on the creative side, and, and then when it came to hip hop, like I said, my uncle was a rap artist. He went by AZ Chief, so that wish to do this has kind of always been there, like surrounding me, like hip hop, which has always been there. And, like, we used to do these, like, Christmas parties and and he would gather all his friends, and they would like, sit by the bonfire, and they would just freestyle for an hour or two, and they would just go back and forth. And I remember just, like, being in awe of it all, and being like, wow. I want to be older so I can be a part of this freestyle thing. I always loved music though. I took choir in high school, I took music theory, and then when I got out of high school, I went to the Los Angeles Recording School for audio engineering, and I really wanted to be on the production side of things. I didn't graduate, unfortunately, but I found myself wanting to be behind the mic more than behind the board. And it honestly just kind of started with poems. I don't say this much, but I am a survivor of domestic abuse and violence, and so when I was in a really bad relationship, it led to me being in the hospital for a month. And so during that time, it gave me the opportunity to write what I was feeling. And it started off as poems. They were really aggressive. They were really angry, you know? And then, like, I don't know, I just decided one day I was like, I literally was in the bathroom, and I was recording myself on this beat using my laptop microphone. Like I didn't even have a regular microphone, and I wrote a diss track to my ex boyfriend, you know. And and, like, ever since then, I don't think I've ever stopped making music, you know....I was just raised into it...and I found, like, a safe space in hip hop, in writing and all that and so. And that was about 2016 and I've been doing it since then. Yeah, and like, having people that uplift you is so important. And to feel validated. You know, I was cleaning my room and I found my uncle's

old CD. He called it *Rough Cuts*. And, like, it was so funny. It has Supaman on it, has Blessed One on it. And it's so funny because, like, these are, this is who my uncle was working with at that time. And like, who would have known fast forward 20 some years later, I would be working with the exact same people, you know. So, yeah, it's been really dope... Hip hop really saved my life, like it really did. I wouldn't even be here without it. And I'm so grateful for Def-i who gave me my first show. You know, like his Gathering of MCs was my very first live performance ever. And you know, because he was a family friend, he watched me grow up. And so, like, I'm very fortunate too, because, like, as much as Def-i frustrates me sometimes like a cousin would, he's in a sense, like, beside my mom, the only family that really supports me. My uncle does music, but he doesn't support me. I don't have much of a support system. I haven't talked to my uncle in three years because he's jealous. Like, I hate to say it, but he knew that I was making music. I just met Mato [Wahuyi, rapper and composer of the Rez Dogs soundtrack]. I met him in Santa Fe, two years ago, at the Tumbleroot show. We met after the performance, me and Mato, and then, like, literally, two days after meeting, we make "Stankface." We fly out to Oregon. Fast forward, six months later, he tells me he's doing the half Phoenix Suns halftime show. He wants to do "Stankface" and bring me up. I was like, oh my god. So I tell my uncle. I'm like, hey, I'm gonna do the Phoenix dance halftime show with Mato. And I just remember him telling me, "well, that's really good and I'm really happy for you, but just remember that you're still a nobody." Then I invited him out to Indigenous People's Day in Phoenix where Mato was headlining that year and I was performing, and I just remember, like him making small comments like, "wow, the president of Navajo Nation has never been to any of my concerts." Or, like, "no one's ever paid me money to perform." I think he sees me and it's like, I'm doing everything that he wished he would have done at that age. And I think that, you know, it sucks because he's my uncle, and I really needed his support because, you know. He was part of the music

industry, part of the Native music scene, and he didn't want to help me, you know. I was constantly looking for studios in Phoenix. I was constantly looking for producers. I needed help, and he didn't want to help me. And I had to do it all by myself, you know. And it was hard, and it sucked, because it was like, damn, like I don't even have the support of my family, you know. And so that too, like all that anger goes into my music as well, you know? Sorry, I'm aggressive. This is what I deal with. This is my life. All I have is my mom and me and my grandma, you know? But that is why people like Def-i has been so important to me. That's why I'm here now at the Santa Fe Indian Market, you know. Doing his show at Tumbleroot.²⁰⁰

Just like Indigeneity requires relations and there is no singular Native experience, there is no singular story of Native hip hop. It is complex, full of both pain and joy. It has creation stories on every Rez and in every community. The story I wish to tell however, is one of relationality. It is a story of Native hip hop artists who deeply understand their craft and the history of hip hop. When speaking about Mato Wahuyi, Mays and Hitchmough share that

Mato being the musical composer [of Rez Dogs] is significant for a few reasons. First, he has combined both Black and Indigenous music throughout the show in a remarkable way, without sacrificing his own creative vision. He also does not reproduce the expected stereotypes of Indigenous music—something that much of Hip Hop does. Instead, he offers musical medicine that allows for all of Indian Country to engage with his work.²⁰¹

From the mentorship that Myka 9 gave to Def-i to the mentorship that Def-i continues to give A\$h Da Hunter, it exemplifies Black/Native solidarity and represents intergenerational conversations through hip hop. As a hip hop elder, Myka 9 builds spaces where Native hip hop artists have the very capacity to pass hip hop bundles. He is far from the only one.

²⁰⁰ A\$h Da Hunter, personal communication, August 17, 2024

²⁰¹ Hitchmough and Mays 2024, p. 139

As hip hop legends, the Wu-Tang Clan tours frequently, both as a group and as individual emcees. Most recently as part of their “Wu-Tang Forever” tour, they performed at the United Center in Chicago (July 7, 2025), Madison Square Garden in NYC (July 16, 2025), and the Wells Fargo Center in Philly (July 18, 2025). Yet despite these massive arenas, they have always been connected to the underground, and especially the Rez. On March 22, 2025, Masta Killa of Wu-Tang did a show at the Lauter Haus Brewing Co in Farmington, NM, bordering the Navajo Reservation at the northwest corner of New Mexico. Def-i was, of course, connected.

Just a few months later, Def- shared a bill with Wu-Tang member Cappadonna in Albuquerque for his show “Wu-Mexico” on June 17, 2025. After the show, Def-i posted

Thanks to everyone who made it out last night and to @thehustle101.3 for bringing us all together on a Tuesday.²⁰²

Even while on this stadium/arena tour, the Wu-Tang Clan made it a priority to do community-based shows, especially with Natives. Just a few weeks after the Albuquerque show, Def-i had a night off, so he went up to Denver, CO, to see the actual “Wu-Tang Forever” tour. While he was there, however, he got to catch up with GZA and even play chess with him. Finally, the start of August 2025 saw Def-i open for Wiz Khalifa and Big Daddy Kane, as well as collaborate with Abstract Rude for three community-centered events—an arts festival centering Native culture in the border town of Las Cruces, a community event on the Jemez Pueblo Reservation, and an Afrofuturist-centered event called “Down for the Crown.”

²⁰² def_i. “Thanks to everyone who made it out last night and to @thehustle101.3 for bringing us all together on a Tuesday. Make sure to catch the whole WU-TANG CLAN on tour now !!” Instagram, June 18, 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DLDjk7jjxM_/.

Throughout this section, it is clear that Native hip hop is not a separate entity from hip hop itself. Just like the very bundles that it passes, Native hip hop requires relationality and gifts these relations and responsibility. Through its very existence, it sounds a history of Black/Native solidarity and the survivance of Natives. Even then, it is not just a history. It is a living relation that requires renewal and constant maintenance. Even though the Dignified Planets' tracks that contain Black Power references such as "Black Ego" and "Dog It" are from their 1994 album *Blowout Comb*, performing them in 2024 in the Southwest while stating that they are on Native land does the work of renewing relations and recentering Black/Native solidarity. As I have stated in my introduction, Native hip hop that takes from Blackness exists, but this dissertation is interested in Native hip hop that is part of deeper networks of kinship. Performance studies scholar T. Roberts discusses different modes of appropriation—what they call minstrelsy, passing, and identification. Black/Native solidarity within Native hip hop is rooted in identification. Roberts defines this type of appropriation as the "retention of the self while drawing performative connections to the Other."²⁰³ By doing so, "the Other provides gestures, sounds, or techniques that allow the performer to express an alternate or more complete version of themselves than previously available."²⁰⁴ Instead of recreating a caricature of Blackness, many Native hip hop artists draw on these relations, sharing their own teachings through hip hop—not by performing Blackness but by heightening the visibility of Indigeneity through coalition-building.

While hip hop is, of course, a site of solidarity, the relationality that Native hip hop requires extends far beyond the music. It not only lives in the graffiti reading "The Natives

²⁰³ Roberts, T. *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 60.

²⁰⁴ Ibid

Remain...Cool Like Dat” at a Dignable Planets show and in the other pillars of hip hop present, but also in the relationships built through hip hop. Def-i getting to kick it with GZA and play chess together goes far beyond hip hop, but it still represents the solidarity built within hip hop spaces. This maintenance continues to build radical futures, introducing youth to Black hip hop artists who are elders in the community and re-instilling the coalitions that make Native hip hop kin and a site of intergenerational knowledge.

Conclusion

As I described at the beginning of this chapter, creation stories—just like every part of Native life—require relationality. How Black/Native solidarity continues to go back and forth from the rural to the urban and back again shows the complexities in which hip hop serves as a binding agent. Unlike prominent narratives that claim hip hop entered reservations through radio, vinyl, and CDs (which did happen too, of course), hip hop, as a product of years of Black/Native consciousness and community building, exemplifies how it passes bundles.

It is paramount that Black and Native communities continue to leverage this solidarity to fight settler infrastructure. Regarding the murders of Natives during police encounters, “the recent ‘Safety and Justice Challenge’ report from the MacArthur Foundation suggests the rate is now 3 times more than white people and 2.6 times higher than Black people.”²⁰⁵ Mays and Hitchmough have also shown that

The MacArthur Foundation report, “Over-incarceration of Native Americans: Roots, Inequities and Solutions,” points to consistently disproportionate rates of

²⁰⁵ Hitchmough and Mays 2024, pp. 120–121

over-incarceration, 38% higher than the national average, and Native Americans are overrepresented in the prison population in 19 states compared to any other race and ethnicity.²⁰⁶

There is much scholarship about the school-to-prison pipeline.²⁰⁷ The prison industrial complex continues to prey on communities of color and rip futures away from youth, making Native pedagogy through hip hop critical in order to build futures. Because of the history of schooling towards Black and Native communities, the knowledge keepers and their ways of teaching have been targeted for erasure by colonization. Through both assimilation and assumptions about intelligence, white pedagogical tools have been forced upon them and prioritized as the only real knowledge.

As I argued in the introduction to this chapter, colonization has deemed certain spaces as uninhabitable. As “technologies of maintenance,” schools have been transformed into uninhabitable places for Black and Native youth. Civilizing—as the only goal of race-based curriculum—did the work of erasing community-based productions of knowledge, thus prioritizing white intelligence. Although I will return to the uninhabitable as a physical geography, I also think of the uninhabitable as spaces that control Black and Native folks. It is this control—be that geographic arrangements, the disposing of toxic

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 121

²⁰⁷ Kim, Catherine Y. et al. *The School-to-Prison Pipeline : Structuring Legal Reform*. NYU Press, 2010.

Kukahiko, Keali'i, et al. “Deconstructing the School to Prison Pipeline in Hawai'i : Revitalization and Restoration of Kānaka, 'Āina and Kuleana Through Language and Cultural Practices.” *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2024, pp. 83–105.

Okilwa, Nathern. et al. *The School to Prison Pipeline : The Role of Culture and Discipline in School*. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017.

Rodriguez, Miguel A. “Beyond the Classroom: The School-To-Prison Pipeline as a Public Health Crisis.” *Social Work in Public Health*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2026, pp. 292–96.

Tanase, Madalina and Dilek Kayaalp. “How Are Black Students Pushed Down the School-to-Prison Pipeline?” *Critical Questions in Education*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2026, pp. 18–39.

Tynan, Emma K., and Mark R. Warren. “Mass Incarceration and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: The Intergenerational Transmission of Criminalization.” *International Journal of Adolescence & Youth*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2025, pp. 1–16.

waste, surveillance, policing, or schooling—that fuels the civilizing projects created by settlers. The rural and the urban, therefore, reflect settler ideas of civilization. However, it is this paradox that makes surveillance such an important part of the uninhabitable. Black and Native folks migrated to cities, and yet settlers recreated the uninhabitable while simultaneously creating curriculum as part of these civilizing projects. Under the guise of urban migration, settlers could now more easily surveil these communities.

Hip hop, then, combats the uninhabitable from the ground up. Taking place away from the settler gaze, at community-centered events, festivals, workshops, underground shows, studios, collaborations, and more, hip hop, as a relation, negates the very notion of the uninhabitable. Rural land that settlers have deemed uninhabitable has always had relations that have guided and sustained communities. Uninhabitability as a concept exists only because settlers lack understanding of how to live with the land and all our relations. Therefore, as a relation, hip hop makes the urban habitable despite the settler infrastructure of the classroom, redlining, and surveillance. Hip hop guides and sustains ways of life, requiring us to use our responsibility to give back to hip hop. Even today, the uninhabitable remains a key part of Black and Native life.

Native centered pedagogy, then, is critical. While Black/Native solidarity informs this entire dissertation, my second chapter builds on this history to argue that Native hip hop pedagogy does the work of returning to ourselves. Because the current educational curriculum does not value Native knowledge systems and has historically been used to civilize Black folks and Natives, hip hop, rooted in oral traditions and storytelling, allows the community to pass and share knowledge through hip hop bundles. Passing knowledge outside of schooling systems is radical because it breaks the ties that institutions have with

the first colonial missionary education systems. It is, in a very real sense, abolitionist. As a way to combat the civilizing project, the passing of knowledge debunks the myth of uninhabitability. The civilizing project in and of itself relies on the assumption that Natives and Black folks need to be educated, and the passing of knowledge through hip hop bundles counters this narrative through ancestral teachings and relations. Native hip hop pedagogy, therefore, centers hip hop as a relation in the face of the uninhabitable.

Chapter 2

Native Hip Hop Pedagogy: Cultivating, Gifting, and Passing Native Hip Hop Bundles

“I think that’s right,” my dad said to me over the phone. His ears for transcribing music are still better than mine sometimes. “I can hear bass lines really well, but you’ve always been better at this kind of complex harmony.” I do not necessarily agree with him. After years of gigging on electric bass, guitar, and trumpet, my dad went back to school (Berklee College of Music) in his 50s to learn the upright bass.

“Okay well if the bass line is C#, Bb, D, Eb, E, F#, G#, then I’m pretty confident with the rest,” I reply. I know, I mix flats and sharps, it is just how my brain works. “The melody is that B to C# to E thing which is cool. I mean I love this stuff, pentatonic melodies over harmony that you can’t explain.”

I am sitting at my baby grand piano in Chicago, and my dad has his guitar out in Massachusetts. I had emailed him the link to a Tiny Desk Concert by Black, Choctaw, and Creek artist Mumu Fresh, and was transcribing the first song she performed, “Ink Pata.” The song starts with her singing an ancestral melody of “Ink Pata.” Each time she gets to the end, she starts again and uses her loop pedal to keep the previous time through in order to add another layer. After she builds harmony with herself the first four times, the fifth time through she improvises her way over the harmonies. She continues improvising through the fifth and sixth loops, only to cue the keys player on the seventh loop. The cue for Ray Angry on keys is a finger point right on the downbeat of the seventh loop, so he quickly jumps in, but the first chord he plays is beat three of the first measure, an A#-7b5b9.

$\text{♩} = 76$ Loops 1 through 4

Loop 4

Loops 1 and 3

Loop 2

Keys

Acoustic Bass

⁵ Loops 7 through 11

L. 4

L. 1+3

L. 2

Keys

Bass

C#-7 A#-7b5b9 Dmaj7 D#-7b5b9 E6 F#7 G#-7b13 C#-

⁹ Loops 12 and on

L. 4

L. 1+3

L. 2

Keys

Bass

C#-7 A#-7b5b9 Dmaj7 D#-7b5b9 E6 F#7 G#-7b13 C#-

Figure 7: Transcription mine.

"I guess the second chord can also be C#-7/A#," my dad says.

"Yeah but that's not how I hear it when I listen. It sounds to me like a diminished passing chord, or at least that's how I hear it functioning. So the Bb-7b5b9 feels right, despite there being a b9 in the melody on that -7b5. And same with the Eb-7b5b9 chord. It's got the b9 in the melody but F#7/Eb doesn't sound right to me, especially as it's literally passing between D and E."

My dad plays through the chords a few more times on his guitar. "Yeah I hear that," he says. He has me on speaker and my mom is sitting at their kitchen table too.

"You both should listen to it," I tell them, and they do.

"Ink Pata"
Mumu Fresh
2018

(9 times)

Ink pata nawazin nawazin cicoze
maya, maya, leciya kuwana

I am the daughter of freedom fighters and farmers
bootleggers and number runners
Copper colored skin like clay
cooler than Indian summers blooded by oracles and seers
water pourers and healers
once were warriors now killers and drug dealers
Mississippi Choctaw and Creek but raised in Baltimore
so my vernacular from the streets so we move carefully
my pack of wolves they care for me, prayerfully you'll only lose a limb fooling with them
I am the product of a gypsy in the kingpin
I exist somewhere between Egypt and Sing Sing
born to be a revolutionary since a wee thing
rebellion in the memory of the mammaries I was drinking
I am the product of prayers and potions and heartbreak and devotion
I come from gorgeous women who cut and shoot and don't say sorry later
short-tempered, easily provoked, they possess spirits

conjure worlds, see the future, clutch their pearls, stay hella woke
enchant men, birth and raise babies, yeah lots of them in
and living room floors with no doctors or Western medicine
they carry water, talk to God, wash their hair, up in the clouds
cuz they cool like dat, and we strong like dat
we cry silently, caressing our disappointments
tucking the hurt deep down inside of our ovaries for safekeeping of course
until the next girl was born, my heart was broken before I ever cut the cord
I was raised under the floorboards, the ones America likes to forget about
the ones on which you built your little pretty white house
yeah the ones on the prairies the ones I'm talking about
children torn from mothers by colonizer's orders
long before America ever had borders
Native babies stolen at tender ages shipped to the West Indies to slavery
this is America, don't get you slippin' no
we be the people you call low-lives, dangerous, hood rats, wild,
Indians, colored, deplorable, untamed, savages, gangstas, n****s
go getters, super predators, go figure
do for self, kings, queens, gods, master teachers, alchemists,
Africans, Natives and bondage but my spirit free
I was born to bring more light into the world
that's why you see so much fight in yo' girl cuz God's work is so gangsta
and I got so much more to be thankful for
I am red clay, dirt roads, aş, tobacco fields, prayer ties, sweetgrass, peyote
I survived the Trail of Tears and slavery, this here's what you call unmatched bravery
and if you want this blessing on your stage, isn't it all about the money
but baby you gon' have to pay me, say we call it reparations
see I learned to sing not in school but in ways you wouldn't understand
see singing wasn't about songs, it was about sound and the laying on of hands
I watched my grandmother pull pain from the aching bodies of sobbing grown men
with the sound that started in her pit, escaped her lips, and made them whole again
we Black Indian, this red and brown blood it runs so deep
this ceremony, this sacrifice is nothing you could ever teach
unless you crawl back into the deep black womb of the healing lodge
to rebirth yourself brand new
and learn that we are just spiritual beings having a human experience
and nothing else is ever true
we are spiritual beings having a human experience
and nothing else is ever true

Ink pata nawazin nawazin cicoze
maya, maya, leciya kuwana
maya, maya, maya, maya, leciya kuwana
maya, maya, maya, maya, leciya kuwana

As the bass and drums drop out for the outro, two violins and a cello begin to play. All the while, the looped ancestral song is still going. On the second-to-last loop, it cuts out, and Mumu Fresh improvises on “maya” for the last two loops. Sonically, Mumu Fresh’s very identity (Black Indian) lends itself to Black/Native solidarity. It is the ancestral melody over jazz and gospel harmony that creates something like a -7b5b9 chord. It is what makes it make harmonic sense when a harmony class would tell music students otherwise.

The call between my dad and me was also part of what I consider Native hip hop pedagogy. The conversation had and the knowledge passed around this Mumu Fresh track is the very sonic relationality that is required of listeners. As Natives, it is this very process of citational practices through sampling and looping that creates intergenerational conversations. Mumu Fresh is doing this through “Ink Pata,” and as a listener, I was doing it with my dad, and we were calling upon our own ancestors. Mumu Fresh says that “this ceremony, this sacrifice is nothing you could ever teach.” As we slowly unraveled “Ink Pata’s” bundle, we were gifted responsibility into the relational practice of reworlding that shifts between temporal and spatial sensibilities. Not only did her lyrics gift a Black and Native history, but my dad and I were having a conversation through Black and Native sonic landscapes. As I explained in the introduction, my dad’s Afro-Native Mexican identity is complex, but in a very real way, he, too, is Black Indian. Us being passed and subsequently passing knowledge through “Ink Pata’s” bundle is its own ceremony. This pedagogy is “nothing [settlers] could ever teach.”

The Making of Native Hip Hop Pedagogy

I pulled up to Indigifest of Nations about twenty minutes before Def-i's set on August 10, 2024, at the Open Space Visitor Center in Albuquerque, NM. Just before I got out of the car, I looked at my phone—"feels like 104." The center itself housed work by various local artists and also served as a rest stop for the Coors Bosque Trail, which hugged the Rio Grande. The festival was outside in the garden area, while simultaneous workshops were held inside the center. I walked around to the vendors, admiring the art, food (frybread, Indian tacos, and Native boba tea), and community care through organizations tabling for different causes. During Def-i's performance, there was even a Native financial literacy workshop inside.

At 1 PM, Def-i walked up to the stage and grabbed the mic. There was a small crowd of maybe ten folks scattered throughout the seated area under the tent. I later asked him how he feels when he does events for small crowds. He said,

Honestly, here in the Southwest if it's over 100, folks text me and say "see you at the next one bro" and I get it. But I don't mind small crowds. If I can engage and make a difference to one person, I'll leave happy.²⁰⁸

During most performances, Def-i does an object freestyle. He says the art of improvisation and storytelling in hip hop is dying and emphasizes the importance of keeping freestyling a valued part of hip hop culture. He asked the audience to come up and bring random objects for him to incorporate into his rap. A little girl brought her frybread, a volunteer brought her Indian taco, an elder brought her paddle fan, and I held up my water bottle. As he was going through the objects and rapping to the beat, a Diné attendee, Izzo, gave him her

²⁰⁸ Conversation with Def-i on August 10, 2024.

phone, and he said, "We're the people from the sacred mountains, and I got a message for ya, shout out to the home girl with the phone who just got a text from Montoya." Everyone cracked up, including Izzo, who replied, "Why you gotta share my biz like that?"

Def-i then asked everyone to circle up around him. "This next song is for the mamas," he said.

My mom is everything to me. Taught me about the sacred mountains. The land. About my ancestors. She taught me everything I know and continues to teach me every time I see her. This song is for her and to all the mamas out here being that guiding light.



Figure 8: Image taken by author of Def-i performing on August 10, 2024 at the Open Space Visitor Center in Albuquerque, NM. This image is from the song about mamas.



Figure 9: Image taken by author of Def-i performing on August 10, 2024 at the Open Space Visitor Center in Albuquerque, NM

This chapter builds towards a Native hip hop pedagogy that passes hip hop bundles. By implementing Native hip hop as pedagogy through Simpson, artists and hip hop itself are able to share what scholars have proposed as a rematriated curriculum. This chapter, then, is in two parts: Native hip hop pedagogy that centers knowledge specifically, and that which centers language. The first section examines knowledge and Native hip hop pedagogy at festivals, workshops, and shows hosted by venues. Across these different spaces, Native rappers deploy curriculum through their performances and community engagement. The second section, on the other hand, is centered on language education, focusing on artists from the Americas who use Native hip hop bundles to transmit language

knowledge across space and time. As Def-i rapped, he centered Native feminist teaching and matriarchal systems of living. The Native hip hop artists in this dissertation push back against dominant portrayals of hip hop masculinity, using pedagogical tools of the land and all its relations.

Def-i has told me so much about his mom. Dr. Pandora Mike is an incredible Diné woman who holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership for Change. She has been an elementary school teacher, a principal, a director of her school district, an assistant superintendent, a deputy superintendent, and has taught at multiple colleges—all in Navajo Country. Def-i is so proud of her, especially the way in which she uses Diné philosophy in educational spaces with Diné students. Def-i's implementation of Native hip hop pedagogy is intergenerational, always in conversation with his mom and her ancestors before her. Using the many bundles his mom passed to him, he gives Native hip hop bundles to every attendee and listener. With all that he does, Def-i centers Native feminist—as I will define through Eve Tuck as “rematriated”—curriculum.²⁰⁹

In chapter one, I argued that hip hop serves the Native community, whereas schooling and settler-enforced curricula historically have not. This chapter, then, builds on the history I have laid out to show how Native hip hop cultivates, gifts, and passes Native hip hop bundles. If pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching, then by pushing back against colonial educational structures, Native hip hop allows for a shift in educational modalities. Native knowledge is cultivated in Nations and relations, is gifted with a great deal of responsibility, and is passed with the expectation that relations are always at the forefront of knowledge systems.

²⁰⁹ Tuck, Eve. “Rematriating Curriculum Studies.” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2011, pp. 34–37.

One potential way to understand the dissemination of knowledge is through public pedagogy, which roots knowledge in networks of people rather than in institutions (Giroux 2000 and 2004; Sandlin et al 2010). Interdisciplinary Latine studies scholar Nathalia Jaramillo contends that, “[u]nlearning by exercising collective voice—public power—is public pedagogy.”²¹⁰ She continues that “[u]nlearning silence in the face of injustice is a precondition for coming to voice.”²¹¹ While public pedagogy is decolonial because it is not tied to a government curriculum and builds collective community power, it does not require the same relations and responsibilities. To non-Natives, public knowledge is “free” in the Western sense of ownership, as I discussed in the introduction. It is a gift that shifts ownership to someone else. Public pedagogy is, of course, useful because it roots itself in on-the-ground organizations and networks, but it lacks the gifting of responsibility required to hold knowledge as a relation. Public pedagogy is often seen as knowledge to be taken and used. While useful in different contexts, knowledge as a free resource does not require the same reciprocity as knowledge as a relation. To view knowledge as a relation requires an unraveling of the bundle to honor how that knowledge came to be and what that knowledge requires of us.

Indigenizing pedagogical scholarship, self-described Quechua national and scholar Sandy Grande theorizes around her idea of red pedagogy.²¹² She writes that red pedagogy is

- (1) the subjection of the processes of whitestream schooling to critical pedagogical analyses;
- (2) the decoupling and dethinking of education from its Western, colonialist contexts; and

²¹⁰ Jaramillo, Nathalia. “Public pedagogy as an act of unlearning.” In Sandlin, Jennifer A. et al. *Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling*. London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 500–510, p. 503.

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 503

²¹² As an aside, Grande said that one of her top three favorite songs that represents her struggle is Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” in a 2022 interview. Retrieved from: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-indigenous-elsewhere-a-conversation-with-sandy-grande/>.

(3) the institution of Indigenous efforts to reground students and educators in traditional knowledge and teachings.²¹³

She also foregrounds that Western education and the institution of schools—youth public schools and college-level institutions—are a primary source of colonization, which I have also shown in chapter one.

Hip hop has also long been a site for the passing of knowledge, and critical hip hop pedagogy (CHHP) has an extensive body of scholarship (Akom 2009; Hill 2009; Hill and Petchauer 2013; Prier 2012 and 2013). CHHP scholar Courtney Rose contends through Goodwin 2010²¹⁴ that the “various institutions of society are structured to (re)produce inequalities through the socialization of citizens under normalized and institutionalized ideas about what is acceptable and preferred in society.”²¹⁵ This quote mirrors my argument in chapter one that settlers reproduce racial hierarchies through education. Rose further contends that settler educational systems often label children of color as “deficient and in need of remediation and correction.”²¹⁶ Therefore, CHHP prioritizes “their out-of-school ways of knowing and being to thrive,” fostering an “emancipatory space in which both student and teacher are liberated from traditional standardized, assimilationist approaches.”²¹⁷ These approaches to liberation often derive in part from hip hop drawing from ancestral modes of passing knowledge. Ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes argues that, “[t]he artistic usage of language is significant in black communication as exhibited in folk

²¹³ Grande, Sandy. *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004, p. 74.

²¹⁴ Goodwin, A. L. “Curriculum as Colonizer: (Asian) American Education in the Current U.S. Context.” *Teachers College Record*, vol. 112, no. 12, 2010, pp. 3102–3138.

²¹⁵ Rose, Courtney. “Toward a Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy for Teacher Education,”. In Emdin, Christopher and Adjapong, Edmund, eds. *#HipHopEd: The Compilation on Hip-hop Education: Volume 1: Hip-hop as Education, Philosophy, and Practice*. Brill Sense, 2018, pp. 27–37, p. 32.

²¹⁶ Ibid, p. 32

²¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 32–33

preaching, narrative forms, and black talk," and that hip hop "is an urban modification of the latter."²¹⁸ Hip hop as oral tradition, storyteller, and kin makes it an ancient part of both Black and Native communities.

Liberation from settler educational systems requires an alternative set of knowledge rooted in the community. Abolitionist teaching and education scholar Bettina Love contends that knowledge—and by extension how the community gifts that knowledge—itsself is the fifth element of hip hop. Through this theorization, they argue that

The fifth element of hip-hop is also incomplete without directly naming community. The creators of hip-hop understood the interconnectedness of their surroundings, the lived experiences of young people growing up in the Bronx and throughout New York City, the effects of postindustrial America, the impact of decaying public education, police brutality, poverty, racism, and the continual reinvention of the Black Arts Movement.²¹⁹

Sociologist Antwi Akom also argues that by implementing CHHP, a space is created “in the curriculum for students to unlearn their stereotypical knowledge of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other axes of social difference.”²²⁰ Similarly, Chicana studies scholars Lilliana Saldaña and Marco Cervantes posit that hip hop “as decolonial pedagogies provide[s]...emancipatory possibilities to engage in collective struggles towards social justice.”²²¹ While CHHP has been critical to decolonizing urban classrooms, much of the scholarship focuses on Black and Latine youth.

²¹⁸ Keyes, Cheryl L. “Verbal Art Performance in Rap Music: The Conversation of the 80s.” *Folklore Forum*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1984, pp. 143–152, p. 144.

²¹⁹ Love, Bettina. “Knowledge Reigns Supreme: The Fifth Element, Hip-hop Critical Pedagogy & Community.” In Emdin, Christopher and Adjapong, Edmund, eds. *#HipHopEd: The Compilation on Hip-hop Education: Volume 1: Hip-hop as Education, Philosophy, and Practice*. Brill Sense, 2018, pp. 38–43, p. 40.

²²⁰ Akom 2009, p. 63

²²¹ Saldaña, Lilliana Patricia, and Marco Antonio Cervantes. “Hip hop and Nueva Canción as Decolonial Pedagogies of Epistemic Justice.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2015, pp. 84–108, p. 105.

As Kyle T. Mays states, “hip hop studies, like the settler states of Canada and the United States, has an Indigenous erasure problem.”²²² The number of academic texts on Native hip hop makes this clear. Mays argues that,

Indigenous hip hop pedagogy combines a respect for Indigenous people, cultures, and social reality with using hip hop cultures and texts. It is firmly rooted in the history of Indigenous peoples and their struggles against settler colonialism; it is a call to explore how Native people use and can use hip hop in practical ways.²²³

As Native rappers perform, release music for streaming, upload music videos on YouTube, or lead workshops in the community, they engage in Native hip hop as pedagogy by cultivating, gifting, and passing bundles. These events and their body of work constitute a curriculum not connected to colonial educational institutions. They are far more complex than just “practical ways” of using hip hop—they are ancient, ancestral, and intergenerational, employing radical approaches to build Native futures.

Music is medicine. Prayer songs have been sung in ceremonies and gatherings such as powwows and continue to hold space as medicine and bundles more broadly. Music in Native languages is encoded with ancestral knowledge through stories, histories, and cultural values. Music in Native languages can pass on this knowledge without losing ancestral ways of knowing through translation. Music in the colonizer’s language also serves as bundles. Natives who make music are community members first, and their music reflects their worldview and relationship to the world around them.

Native hip hop artists are storytellers, knowledge keepers, and educators. They are the seed keepers. They hold knowledge in their pouches and pass their bundles with each

²²² Mays, Kyle. *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018, p. 129.

²²³ Ibid, p. 145

performance or new release. I argue that Native hip hop pedagogy offers a Native curriculum that is created by and directed at the community, not the institution. Native hip hop curriculum requires the listener to engage with and create their own relationships with the music and its content. As Love argued, knowledge—and, by extension, sharing it with the community—is the fifth element and deeply important to Native hip hop.²²⁴ It is yet another way in which ancestral ways of being map onto hip hop culture, making hip hop an ancient relation.

The word “repatriate” is often offered as a way to give back to Native Peoples, but Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck pushes back to theorize what rematriation might look like instead. Because repatriation is rooted in colonial institutions, Alutiiq scholar Leilani Sabzalian further explains through Tuck that rematriation

provides an elegant mapping of alternative aims that surface when curriculum is theorized with, not on, communities, and when educators take up decolonizing and anticolonial, rather than imperialistic, approaches. Such aims are land- and place-based, relational, intergenerational, and beholden to community knowledge, remembrance, and learning.²²⁵

Similarly, Tuck writes that a “rematriation of curriculum studies is concerned with the redistribution of power, knowledge, and place, and the dismantling of settler colonialism.”²²⁶

While there are many types of Native hip hop in the world, rappers in this dissertation operate from a rematriated curricular standpoint. By centering women, Two-Spirit folks, the land, and relations, Native hip hop curriculum and Native hip hop

²²⁴ Love 2018, p. 40

²²⁵ Sabzalian, Leilani. “Curricular Standpoints and Native Feminist Theories: Why Native Feminist Theories Should Matter to Curriculum Studies.” *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2018, pp. 359–382, p. 372.

²²⁶ Tuck 2011, p. 37

bundles defy learned patriarchy and colonial ways of extracting knowledge for capital.

Sabzalian continues that

Curricular standpoints developed from these premises seek forms of liberation that aren't solely focused on freedom and emancipation from the limits of oppression, but also about rootedness and emplacement within our lands, knowledges, and communities.²²⁷

Native hip hop bundles as pedagogy/curriculum, therefore, “theorize new futurities” by rooting themselves in relations and landedness outside of Western institutions through insistence.²²⁸ Native hip hop does not just let the listener passively listen. Instead, Native hip hop requires—and demands—responsibility from the listener to engage in the very ways of Native life that the music presents. The lens of relationality offers Native listeners, in person and in digital spaces, a way to connect to hip hop through their own worldview while critically engaging with bundles of responsibility.

Rematriation is built on decades of scholarship on Native feminisms. Early scholarship grapples with how Native women situate themselves within or against feminist movements, and how their positionality is framed by larger fights for Tribal/cultural sovereignty within their communities (Hogan 1981; Shanley 1984; Gunn-Allen 1986; Trask 1996; Mohanram 1996; Kuokkanen 2006). There were subsequently scholars who spoke on the learned—and settler enforced—patriarchy within Nations (Jaimes Guerrero 2003; Ramirez 2007; Green 2007; Hall 2008; D’Arcangelis 2010). Juaneño/Yaqui women and gender studies scholar M.A. Jaimes Guerrero argues that

Civil rights and sovereignty, moreover, are fundamentally gendered issues and practices because patriarchy operates both inside and outside the tribe to define belonging (the tribal

²²⁷ Sabzalian 2018, pp. 372–373

²²⁸ Ibid

status) of native women. These two patriarchal structures can, in concert, literally determine whether native women's claims to membership within tribes are honored or ignored.²²⁹

Similarly, Winnebago anthropologist Reyna Ramirez contends that “[s]overeignty can no longer mean that Native men have the right to control Indian women's lives.”²³⁰ She goes on to write that Natives who ignore misogyny and violence “show their ties to other nationalisms and other nationalist projects, movements, and agendas, especially European and Euro-American nationalist movements for the past 200 years.”²³¹ Stating the importance of Native women with the passing of knowledge and tradition, Kanaka Maoli Native studies scholar Lisa Kahaleole Hall asserts that because dismantling patriarchy requires feminist-centered knowledge keepers, “Hawaiian women producing the most powerful decolonizing theory are also musicians, dancers, and/or language teachers.”²³² This review is far from an exhaustive account of scholarship on Native feminisms, and there are many texts published after 2010 that center different Nations and relations (Irwin 2013; John 2015; Tuck andocollet 2016; Goeman 2017; Arvin 2019; Jacob et al. 2019; Dankertsen 2021; Ihmoud 2022; Leonard 2022; Blackdeer 2023; Tuck et al. 2023). I end with quoting Hall, however, to further that Native hip hop as kin carries with it the teachings from a Native feminist perspective. As “musicians, dancers, and/or language teachers,” Native women carry a deep connection to the land, arts, ancestors, and pedagogy that bring the past forward to build futures.²³³ Rematriated curriculum looks different to

²²⁹ Jaimes Guerrero, M.A. “Civil Rights versus Sovereignty: Native American Women in Life and Land Struggles.” In Alexander, M. Jacqui and Chandra Talpade Mohanty --, et al. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. Routledge, 1997, pp. 101–121, p. 103.

²³⁰ Ramirez 2007, p. 31

²³¹ Ibid, p. 29

²³² Hall 2008, p. 279

²³³ Ibid, p. 279

each Nation, just as Native feminism looks different to each Nation and even to each individual. This chapter attempts to weave in broader matriarchal ways of living and teaching in order to argue that Native hip hop itself has learned from Native women just as much as male Native hip hop artists have. The curriculum delivered during performances draws on long lineages of passing knowledge.

One cannot demand teachings as they require responsibility. Teachers, elders, and our more/other-than-human kin provide teachings when they think we are ready to take on the responsibility. Critically, as kin, Native hip hop reveals what it wants to reveal, guiding the listener down a pathway towards understanding through all our relations. It requires us to track, as Santa Clara Pueblo education scholar Gregor Cajete explained. He also speaks on the importance of pathways in educational spaces, prioritizing the teaching process over the answer itself.

The concept of Pathway, revealed in numerous ways in Indigenous education, is associated with mountains, winds, and orientation. Learning involves a transformation that unfolds through time and space. Pathway, a structural metaphor, combines with the process of journeying to form an active context for learning about spirit. Pathway is an appropriate metaphor since, in every learning process, we metaphorically travel an internal, and many times external, landscape. In traveling a Pathway, we make stops, encounter and overcome obstacles, recognize and interpret signs, seek answers, and follow the tracks of those entities that have something to teach us.²³⁴

Native hip hop pedagogy, therefore, gifts bundles that require one to unfold and unwrap across space and time. Native hip hop pedagogy offers multiple tracks that require those

²³⁴ Cajete, Gregory. *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Durango, CO, Kivakí Press, 1994, pp. 54–55.

who engage to do their own tracking through these kin. Tracking along a pathway centers the stops, encounters, and conversations that kin have with each other.

Finally, I follow Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who argues that “we shouldn’t be just striving for land-based pedagogies.”²³⁵ Instead, as she continues, “the land must once again become the pedagogy.”²³⁶ While land- and place-based pedagogies do important work, she argues that land as pedagogy makes an imperative shift—“it’s not just pedagogy; it’s how to live life.”²³⁷ Land as pedagogy is constantly having intergenerational conversations and learning from the land as kin, not learning *about* the land as an object. Following Simpson, I argue that Native hip hop pedagogy is hip hop as pedagogy.²³⁸ Native hip hop as kin allows for the teaching and passing of knowledge not as an institution-informed curriculum but as a tool of survivance.²³⁹ It is learning from hip hop as kin that is critical, not learning about hip hop as an object of study.

As pedagogy, Native hip hop gifts the strength to those who engage with what is inside the bundle. Tlingit linguistic anthropologist Joseph Marks discusses the importance of Indigenizing settler spaces, especially through education. He writes that by taking up space and calling upon ancestors and histories, Natives can act “upon settler signs by taking away their connection to a settler colonial history and imbuing them with new meanings that are indigenously informed.”²⁴⁰ Native hip hop curriculum does a similar remapping of settler signs. Calling upon ancient ways of shapeshifting, hip hop (pedagogy) as kin fits the

²³⁵ Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. 2014. “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1–25, p. 14.

²³⁶ Ibid, p. 14

²³⁷ Ibid, p. 18

²³⁸ Ibid, p. 18

²³⁹ Vizenor 1994

²⁴⁰ Marks, Joseph. “History Becomes Present: Constructing Worlds for Past, Present, and Future Ancestors through Tlingit Oratory.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2025, pp. 47–68, p. 67.

need of the community in any given moment, remapping and Indigenizing the cartographies of settler-enforced education. Connecting in Love's argument that knowledge is the fifth element of hip hop, knowledge has always been kin and therefore has formed kinship.²⁴¹ As knowledge is passed through hip hop bundles and Native hip hop pedagogy, Native ways of doing, being, and knowing shapeshift with each encounter, requiring both responsibility and the formation of new relationships.

Drawing on the Native hip hop creation story I told in the first chapter, Native hip hop pedagogy—as I conceive of it—constantly renews knowledge and relations. Creation stories are not just cultural histories that live in an imagined past. That thinking is the same rhetoric that settlers tell of our Peoples, and one that the settler creation story itself reifies. Instead, each time we hear creation stories, we are reminded of ways of knowing that strengthen our current relationships. Kanien'keha:ka scholar of Native studies Kaitlin Debicki describes that

Each time the creation history and I engage with one another, my perspective—often obfuscated by daily worries, duties, and routines—returns to a relational awareness, a land-centered view that contextualizes me within the love of the earth and my responsibilities to her.²⁴²

While these daily worries can be Native concerns, Debicki is describing the process by which creation stories and Native knowledge sever ties to capitalism and renew relations through regenerative models of education. Native hip hop pedagogy similarly pulls the listener away from settler infrastructure and requires them to take on the responsibility of passing on knowledge gifts. Native hip hop tracks are stories. They tell of histories,

²⁴¹ Love 2018

²⁴² Debicki, Kaitlin. "Yotsitsyonte O:Se and 'Going Back on Their Tracks': Learning to Read Trees and Be My Own Creation Story." *Storytelling, Self, Society*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2020, pp. 80–107, p. 81.

ancestors, ecological knowledge, and ways of being. They are the curriculum. As Sabzalian argued, rematriated curriculum—and red pedagogy through Grande—theorizes Native futures. Oral tradition and storytelling cannot just inform pedagogical shifts within settler institutions; they must once again become the pedagogy.

Part 1: The Passing of Knowledge

Hip Hop Bundles as Rematriated Curriculum

I arrived at 8:30 AM on June 1, 2024, to the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation as parents were dropping off their kids for educational programming. Vendors were parked on the street, already unloading jewelry, clothing, and artwork, preparing for the Vibes with the Tribes Fest 2024. I found Anishinaabe rapper SouFy and his partner, Hadasa, and they connected me with Sonia. Sonia is a queer Boricua who oversaw the layout. I helped her move and set up tables with umbrellas, and then we built the stage together. SouFy and Hadasa had gotten breakfast from Yellow Light Coffee and Donuts and had invited us inside the building. As I walked through the front door, I noticed stunning murals that were rooted in indígena culture. Inside the kitchen, the two head chefs of Mikey's Cocina and Rose's Frybread were preparing for the long day.



Figure 10: Image taken by author of the community room in the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation.

The festival officially opened at 11 AM, and people started making their way in. At around noon, the grand entry officially began. Three songs were performed, calling upon the ancestors—one by Hadasa, one by Pomo rapper Ras K'dee of AudioPharmacy, and the other by Dakota-Arikara rapper Stuart James. After these songs, SouFy and Hadasa had us all stand, and they presented six feathers to the community's matriarchs. SouFy took the mic and said,

Our community was a matriarch before colonization, and even though patriarchy has invaded our culture, our women are still our leaders. I was going down a dark path and these women always kept me in check when I was being a knucklehead.

Shifting credit to these matriarchs and expressing the traditional matriarchal ways of his people was an important act of rematriation to decenter settler ideas of masculinity.

Next was the grand entry of dancers, each carrying a separate flag—Two-Spirit flag, MMIW flag, Every Child Matters flag, All Nations flag, Idle No More flag, and more—to the sounds of traditional drumming and singing. There were three drum circles, all with different names, and they all took turns singing songs. Importantly, they all featured women singers.. After the flags traveled through the powwow area, they did a final flag song.

Once the fancy dance competitions concluded, SouFy got back on the mic and spoke about Waawiyaataanong being both Detroit on the U.S. side, as well as Windsor, Canada on the other side of the river long before there were colonial borders. He went on to say that

Many Natives don't consider urban Natives as authentic, but we grew up extremely tied to our culture here. We learned our ways, were taught by our elders, taught by our women, honor our women, honor this land, and we're part of a community that always claims us.

Despite being the “face” of the Vibes With the Tribes, SouFy continually engaged in feminist land ethics, red pedagogy, and rematriated curriculum. Not only did he express a relationality to the land despite colonial borders, but he also made a point of honoring all the women who actually put on this festival. The artists who agreed to perform also represent the goal of rematriating and Indigenizing hip hop spaces.

The festival then transitioned to the hip hop portion. The first rapper to go on was an Anishinaabe high school rapper named Gimiwan, and after his set, all his cousins and family ran up to hug him. Next was Def-i, and then AudioPharmacy. As part of this lineup, AudioPharmacy also embodies the festival's worldview. They performed songs rooted in

what Navarro calls radical relationality,²⁴³ such as their track “Two Walls.” The first hook is “the two walls will fall and all the people rise,” but as the song continues, the last hook is “all the walls will fall and all the people rise.” Rooted in Native feminist land ethics, the hook “transcends the settler state’s power and processes of recognition and legitimation (e.g. the borders that divide communities, towns, neighborhoods, and nations).”²⁴⁴

AudioPharmacy not only represents a Native feminist land ethic but also a Native hip hop feminism. Originally from the Bay Area, they brought a downsized four-person group to Detroit for this festival. One month later, on July 7, 2024, however, I saw them perform at the Indigenous Red Market in Oakland, CA, with a larger seven-person band. At this event, Afro-Latina and Mexicana Indígena rapper Gina Madrid was there. While there is much scholarship on primarily Black hip hop feminisms (Chew and Mo 2019; Durham et al. 2013; Garcia-Borbón and Alexander 2024; Moody-Freeman 2022; Johnson 2021; Okello 2020; Payne and West 2022; Saunders 2016), there are only a few scholars who have engaged with Native hip hop feminisms. Mays defines Native hip hop feminism as being “rooted first in the experiences of Indigenous women and how they actually live their lives.”²⁴⁵ Chicana/o studies scholar Norell Martínez, however, “expand[s] Mays’ work by calling for an Indigenous hip hop feminism that is transnational, one that is rooted in the experiences and feminist theories of Indigenous women” across colonial borders.²⁴⁶ Much like Martínez’s analysis of Zapotec rapper Mare Advertencia Lirika who I will address in chapter three, “as an Indigenous hip hop feminist, [Gina Madrid’s] anticolonial, antipatriarchal, ecofeminist

²⁴³ Navarro, Jenell. “Solarize-ing Native hip-hop: Native Feminist Land Ethics and Cultural Resistance.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 101–118.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 108

²⁴⁵ Mays, Kyle T. *Hip-hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018, p. 81.

²⁴⁶ Martínez, Norell. “Indigenous Feminist Hip Hop: Invoking the Maíz Diviner to Denounce Agribusiness in Mexico.” *Chicana/Latina Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, pp. 54–90, p. 60.

message calls attention to the linkages between the violence of the land and the violence against women.”²⁴⁷



Figure 11: Image taken by author of AudioPharmacy's performance at the Indigenous Red Market in Oakland, CA on July 7, 2024. Gina Madrid is in the center in the red top, and Pomo artist Ras K'Dee is on the right in the white tank top.

Madrid rapped about M.M.I.W., the femicide of women in Juarez and México more broadly, issues of immigration and the wall at the Mexican border, and returning to Native ways through ancestral knowledge. Because land and ecofeminism are at the heart of Martínez's theorization, I will return more in-depth to Native hip hop feminisms in chapter three as I build towards a Native hip hop ecology. For this chapter, Madrid, AudioPharmacy,

²⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 83

and SouFy all provide a rematriated curriculum through their acts of Native hip hop pedagogy, sharing music and passing knowledge through Native hip hop bundles.

Passing Hip Hop Bundles in Native Spaces through Festivals and Workshops

After Def-i's performance on August 10, 2024, at the Open Space Visitor Center that I described earlier, he walked over to me and asked if I could help set up for his workshop in the indoor gallery. We stepped inside, and the air conditioning hit us hard after being in the 100-plus degree heat. The gallery was full of mostly Native or Mexican artists. We set up, and then chatted for a bit as folks began to trickle in. The attendance was pretty small for the workshop, and there were six folks besides me, including Izzo, her two homies, and a father with his two kids. The workshop went through what storytelling and creative writing mean in the context of hip hop, and then Def-i transitioned to how Native ways are ingrained in hip hop culture. As he went through his slides, he said that to him

Fours are important—four Diné clans, four sacred mountains, four beats in a measure, four pillars of hip hop. The drummer or the DJ was always holding it down in the powwow, and we've always danced to the beat. The drummer in terms of the hip hop DJ still holds that sacred place of creating ceremony. The dancer has always danced at powwows and interpreted the beat of the drum and the ancient stories. Bboys and bgirls do the same thing, they interpret the tracks through their movement. The rapper is the storyteller and has always been a passer of knowledge. Elders have always held knowledge and our stories are keepers of that knowledge. Hip hop has elders too, and rappers also pass on knowledge. The graffiti artists is like the beader, the sand painter, the holder of the art.



Figure 12: Image taken by author of Def-i's workshop at the Open Space Visitor Center on August 10, 2024.



Figure 13: Image taken by author of Def-i's workshop at the Open Space Visitor Center on August 10, 2024.

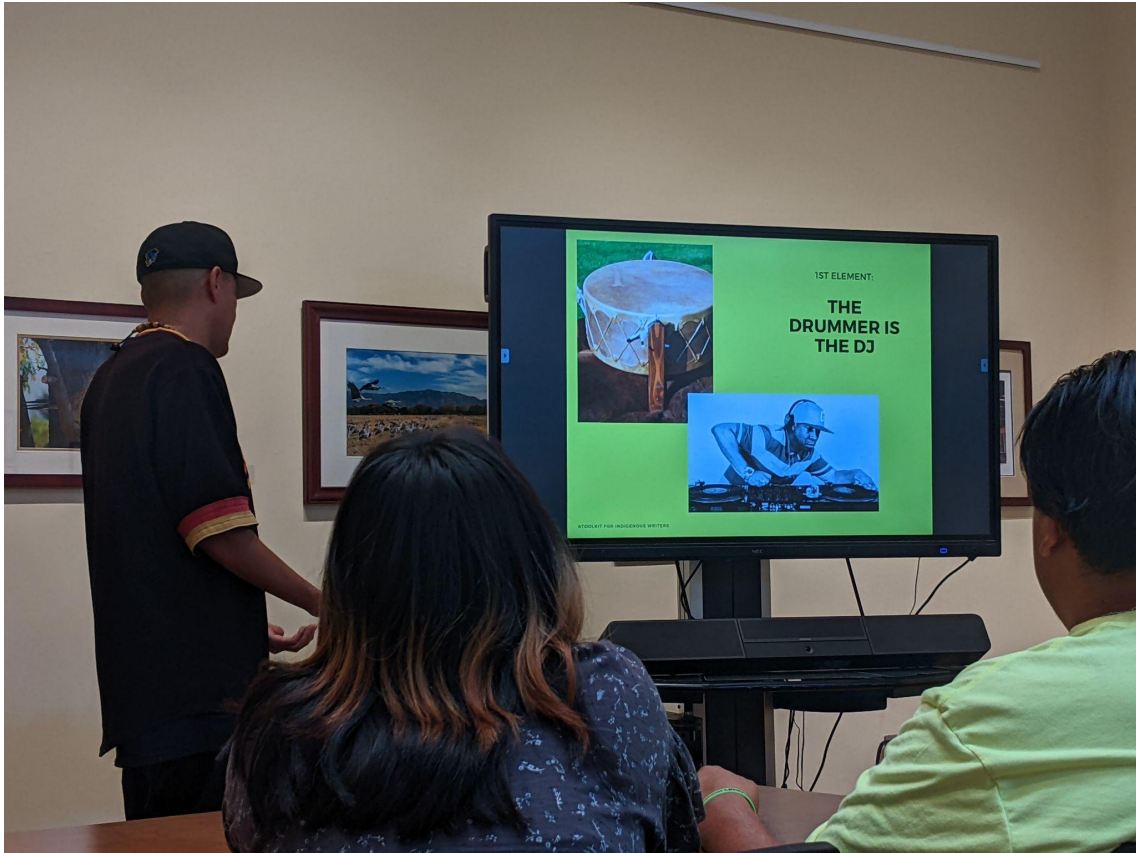


Figure 14: Image taken by author of Def-i's workshop at the Open Space Visitor Center on August 10, 2024.

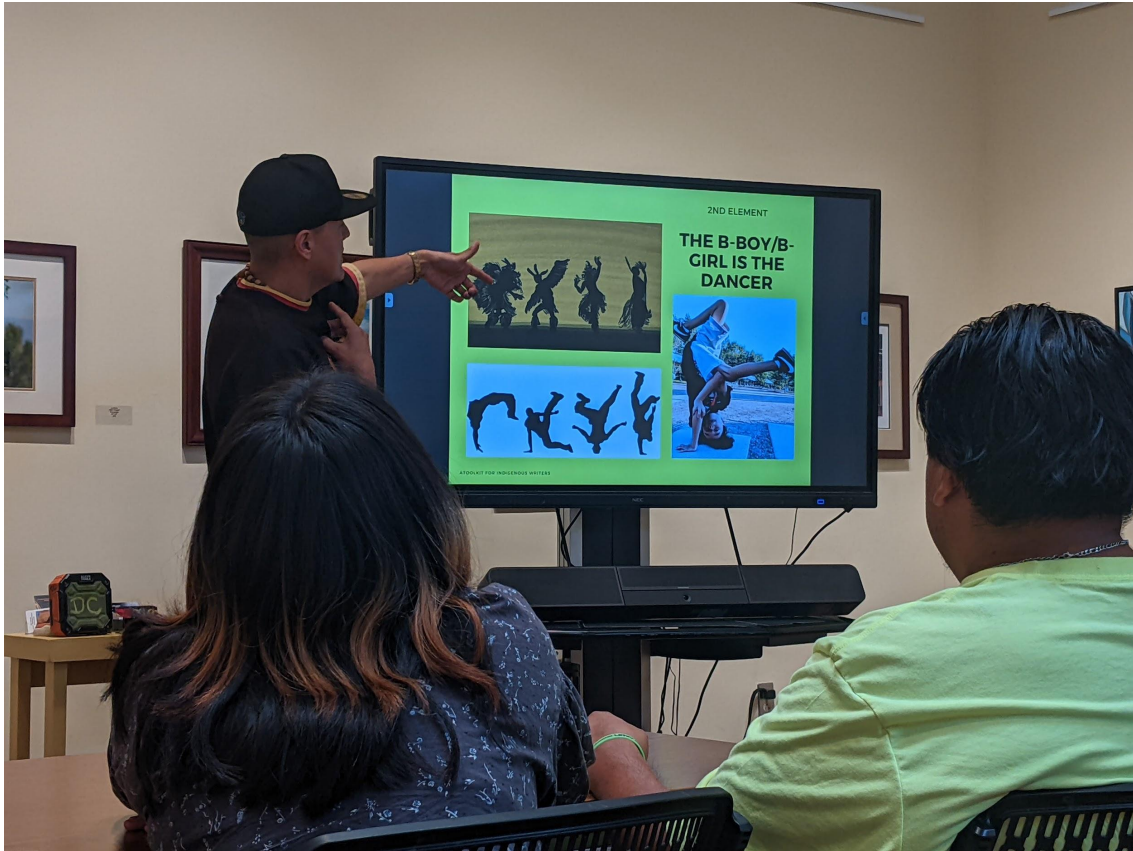


Figure 15: Image taken by author of Def-i's workshop at the Open Space Visitor Center on August 10, 2024.

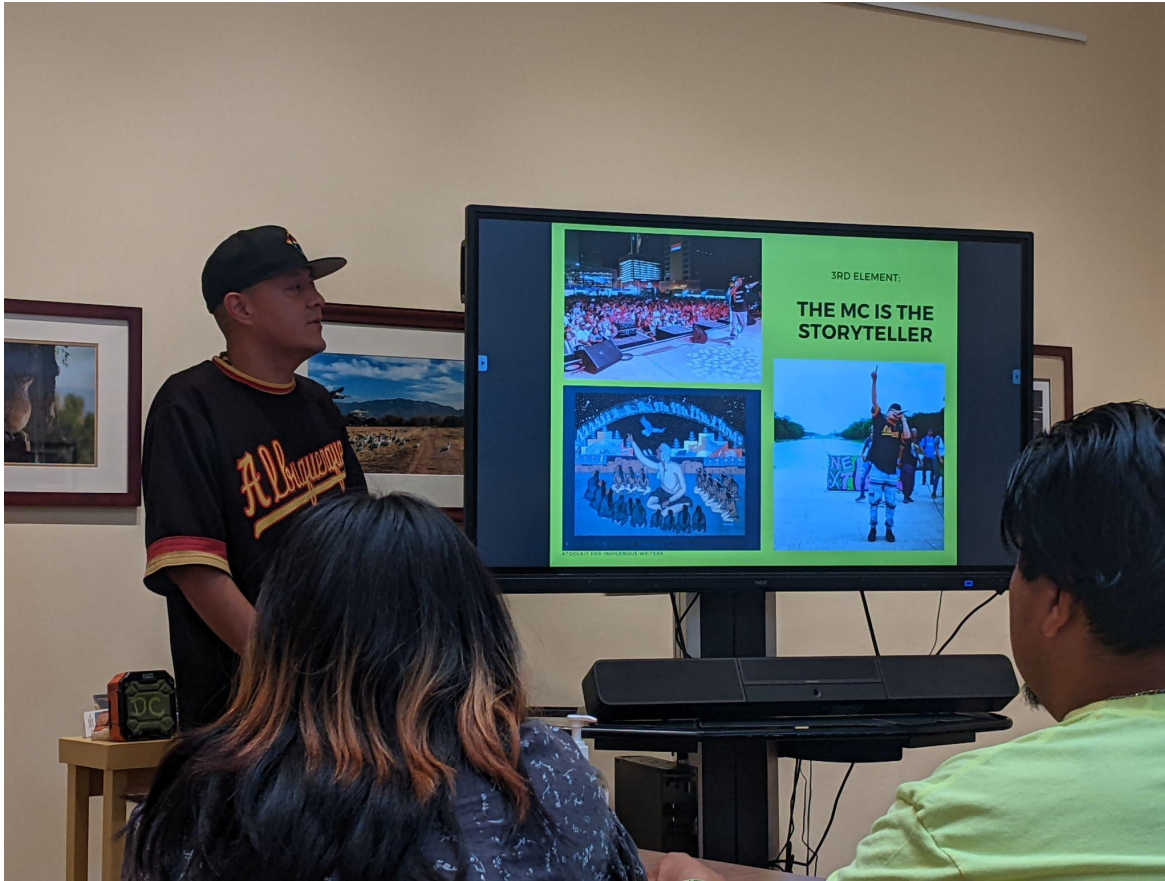


Figure 16: Image taken by author of Def-i's workshop at the Open Space Visitor Center on August 10, 2024.

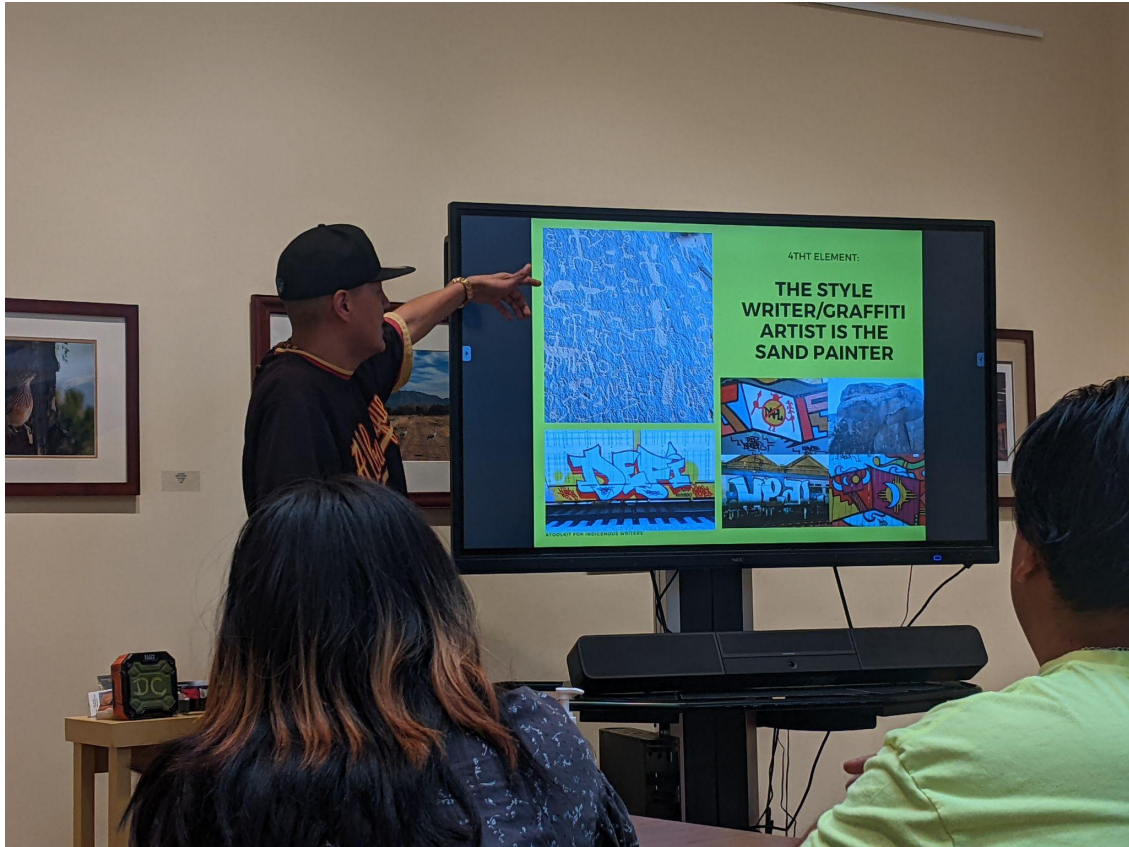


Figure 17: Image taken by author of Def-i's workshop at the Open Space Visitor Center on August 10, 2024.

After the presentation part of the workshop, he had all of us write a few bars to a beat. As the room was full of Natives, he told us to write about something that had meaning to us, whether that was cultural heritage, issues of environmental justice, stopping the violence to Native Peoples and M.M.I.W., sobriety, self-identity, or Mother Earth. He also said that he loves to find creative ways to describe things and that “the personification of inanimate objects is just tapping into your Indigenous perspective as all things have spirits and are our relatives.” Twenty minutes later, he put the beat back on, and everyone went around rapping their lyrics. The love and joy Def-i brought to everyone’s bars was so beautiful. He was so excited to hear what everyone came up with.

Indigenizing hip hop pedagogy, in turn, allows Def-i to pass on Native hip hop bundles through his community-based workshops. Drawing on Quechua scholar Sandy Grande's theorizing of red pedagogy, hip hop practitioners like Def-i use community spaces to continue centering ancestral knowledge. More importantly, hip hop is not just a conduit that Native rappers use for social and material gain, but rather, as kin; Native hip hop is ancient. As Def-i said in his workshop, the DJ, bboy/bgirl, rapper, and graffiti artist embody Native storytelling through the drummer, the dancer, the storyteller, and the artist. Even in his performances, he often speaks to elders through his lyrics during songs and directly to them between songs. Hip hop can be a controversial subject for some folks who are trying to maintain traditional ways of music-making. While during his performances he does not quite go into the same level of detail as in his workshops, the sentiment remains, and he often speaks to folks who might have doubts about hip hop being included in cultural events. Halfway through his set, I watched as the elders began to nod their heads, not necessarily to the beat—however, maybe that too—but in agreement with the lyrical message as Def-i rapped.

I argue that his workshops and his performances more broadly are part of a Native curriculum. Built on red pedagogy and Native hip hop as pedagogy, these curricula take up space at community events and “theorize new futurities.”²⁴⁸ Def-i's workshop draws on the land by using the four sacred mountains to map onto the four pillars of hip hop. Relationality offers Native attendees a way to connect with hip hop through their own worldview, while critically drawing on Tuck's rematriation. Def-i is always intentional about giving space to the “mamas,” women storytellers, femcees, and bgirls, allowing for a Native

²⁴⁸ Sabzalian, p. 373

feminist based curriculum in his teachings. As Hall said, these are the ones who bring the past forward and build futures.²⁴⁹

Curriculum for Non-Native Spaces through Hip Hop Bundles

Although Native hip hop pedagogy thrives in Native spaces, Native rappers' platforms and music can also educate others in non-Native environments. Bobby Sanchez (she/they), a Two-Spirit trans Wari rapper, headlined a show in Brooklyn, NY, on July 5, 2024, that I attended. It had just started to rain as I walked into Wonderville, a dingy arcade dive bar, with my Taiwanese friend Kim. We ordered a drink, and at 8 PM we headed into the adjacent performance room, which had old arcade games and a stage at the far end. A DJ started the night off, so we played old 80s games while listening to the music. It was an extremely queer space, and Kim and I were probably the only straight people there. Soon, a local rapper came on, followed by an artist who played bass, sang, and fully produced all her own backing r&b/funk tracks. Then a Venezuelan DJ spun an hour-long set, playing salsa, cumbia, and more. Finally, Bobby hit the stage at around 11 PM.

Bobby rapped about trans rights, about being Two-Spirit, and about how there were trans/Two-Spirit folks long before colonization. She rapped about Palestine and Native solidarity. She rapped about her language and also in her language. She performed her track "Quechua 101 Land Back Please," and in it she rapped

Rimankichu manachu quechua

harawi harawi ñawi kimsa

kachkaniraqmi wari taytay

sutiyqa inka chuqui chinchay

²⁴⁹ Hall 2008, p. 279

please don't ask me for a translation
cuz I'm only reppin' First First First Nation
please don't talk to me about decolonization
when you still speakin' in the colonizer's language
see you genocide us, then you colonized us
see you sterilized us, and now you fetishize us
you stigmatize us, and then homogenize us
tryin' to co-op the movement and gentrify us
I say no, land back, please, stolen land under siege.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Bobby Sanchez. "Quechua 101 Land Back Please." *YouTube*. March 20, 2021.
https://youtu.be/XT-Dm7LQpfg?si=NHp_On2v6SkaqQ4l.



Figure 18: Image taken by author of Bobby Sanchez performing at the Wonderville bar in Brooklyn, NY, on July 5, 2024.



Figure 19: Image taken by author of Bobby Sanchez performing at the Wonderville bar in Brooklyn, NY, on July 5, 2024.

Bobby also performed her track “Two-Spirit Anthem (Noodl Beats)” where she raps

I’m ancient ways not new age

yes I’m a stick to tradition

Indigenous wisdom and knowledge so listen

transphobia is not part of our language
so please stay out of trans people's business
Two-Spirit, I'm a medicine person
you hear it, I only speak truth in the verses.²⁵¹

In a spoken word performance about her Two-Spirit identity on July 10, 2023, Bobby recited that

This identity predates colonization. This identity predates 1492. This identity predates the birth of Christ. It has and will always exist. This identity is ancient. Trans, non-binary, Two-Spirit, these are new words of a Western language associated with identities that predate that language. It is an ancient identity. The LGBTQ community didn't start in the 60s, it started in ancient times. I'm talkin' ancient like chuqui chinchay kachkanirraqmi qariwarmi. Jaguar, androgynous deity, channelin' masculine feminine energy, channelin' medicine. I am not a third gender, I am the fourth, fifth, sixth entity, so I will not conform to Western identities. We are the descendants of Indigenous Peoples. We are more than just Machu Picchu. Our identities cannot be summed up by LGBTQ. More like Two-Spirit, one body. Let this poem teach you—homophobia, transphobia—this hate cannot destroy an identity that is ancient.²⁵²

Bobby's poem, coupled with the tracks she performed at the New York City performance, reflects her use of Native hip hop pedagogy in majority non-Native spaces. Queer, trans, Two-Spirit, and Nadleeh scholar Souksavanh T. Keovorabouth writes that "many Native American communities have lost their traditional stories about Two-Spirit or their variation

²⁵¹ Bobby Sanchez. "Two-Spirit Anthem (Noodl Beats)." *YouTube*. December 7, 2021.
<https://youtu.be/cmDeCKY9XFU?si=1w6XaSpVPsGrNuWD>.

²⁵² bobbysanchezmusic. "Sharing this poem for Native American heritage Month. This is dedicated to all the Two-Spirit community. Take this as a reminder that you are sacred and beautiful & ANCIENT! This is called "Ancient Identity." Necklace by @myindigenous_fashion_life." *Instagram*. November 12, 2025.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQ9KRUREU00/>.

of Two-Spirit, such as a third gender, within their community due to colonisation and assimilation.”²⁵³ In line with Bobby’s message, Keovorabout describes “Two-Spirit as the recognition of diverse gender, sex, and sexuality prior to settler-colonial contact in the Americas.”²⁵⁴ However, Bobby takes it one step further, stating that “I am not a third gender, I am the fourth, fifth, sixth entity, so I will not conform to Western identities,” refusing to fully conform to English-language terms.²⁵⁵

Bobby’s very presence is critical at a queer event like this show in Brooklyn. Black, queer, and trans-nonbinary cultural studies scholar Ian-Khara Ellasante posits that Two-Spirit identity “rejects the settler imposition of a racialized and rigid gender divide that seeks to erase any beyond-the-binary conceptualizations of gender.”²⁵⁶ They continue that Two-Spirit “challenges the settler-defined categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, or LGBTQ; nomenclature that, despite its demarcations, invisibilizes a range of Indigenous genders and sexualities.”²⁵⁷ Through Native hip hop as an ancient relation, artists such as Bobby offer Native hip hop bundles that expand common conceptions of queerness in urban environments, drawing on knowledge of ancestral ways of being. These bundles share language and conceptions of queerness before colonization. Even in queer spaces, it is deeply important to have Native representation that provides rematriated curriculum.

²⁵³ Keovorabout, Souksavanh T. “The Queer Urban Indigenous City : Understanding the Impacts of the Settler-Colonial State on Urban Indigenous and Two-Spirit Identity.” *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–8, p. 6.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 6

²⁵⁵ bobbysanchezmusic 2025

²⁵⁶ Ellasante, Ian-Khara. “Radical Sovereignty, Rhetorical Borders, and the Everyday Decolonial Praxis of Indigenous Peoplehood and Two-Spirit Reclamation.” *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, vol. 44, no. 9, 2021, pp. 1507–26, p. 1519.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 1519

In a conversation I had with Bobby, she importantly expressed how these pedagogies surrounding Two-Spirit and trans folks build towards Native futures. For Native communities to fully return to themselves, they must do the work of unlearning colonial patriarchal hierarchies and once again honor Two-Spirit folk. She explained that,

Over the last 500 years, there's been so much homophobia and transphobia, like in our Indigenous communities. And like, we've been harming our own youth, our own elders, our own people, right? So like, I care about the Indigenous community, but obviously I really care about the Two-Spirit and LGBT within, right? So I guess, you know, I can't fix all the problems. I don't have all the solutions for every Indigenous nation, right? But I can be big on my own, like in Quechua nation right now, in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the homophobia and the transphobia is bad. It's really bad. I don't even know if I would feel safe walking in my father's Native lands, right? How I dress, how I walk. There's bad things that happen here in New York City, and everywhere, right? It's not really safe in this country either, you know? So, like, I think the one way that I can focus on is showing people that, like, there's Two-Spirit excellence, trans excellence, like you can be a star even if you're LGBT and Indigenous, right? So like that's the future that I'm looking for, you know, making the LGBT Indigenous community feel safe, you know, and respect from your cisgender comrades, from your community, like all showing up for each other, like how we were back in the day, right? Because there was no type of hate. There was acceptance in our communities before colonization. So undoing and unlearning all this hate that we have in our communities is I guess how my music can change the future for Indigenous people.²⁵⁸

She continued that,

I am going to be part of this showcase later this month with four trans women. So, like, it's an all trans women line up. Shows like that are definitely dope to be a part of. One of the

²⁵⁸ Conversation with Bobby Sanchez on August 14, 2024.

performers is Afro-Indigenous and the other two are South Asian. So like, I definitely love those shows more sometimes than the Indigenous celebrations, where I'm like, only one of or the only one LGBT artist on the lineup. Because sometimes it gets like, a little awkward, you know? So I have two different communities, my Indigenous community and my trans community, but I'm trying to find, like, a balance somewhere. I want to have like Two-Spirit powwow type of events, like in New York City. They have one in the Bay Area, and I've been invited, but I just haven't been able to get out there.²⁵⁹

Bobby's example shows the nuance required of the events she participates in. Her being more excited about a trans lineup than a Native lineup reflects much of the homophobia and transphobia that has entered Native communities. As a rehabilitation counselor and advocate of Native populations in Australia, scholar Pétá Phelan furthers Bobby's comments by arguing that, "[f]undamentally, it is also imperative that the inherent diversity of Indigenous LGBTIQA+ populations is acknowledged and understood, thus directing safety and wellbeing, co-design, collaboration, servicing, and support appropriately."²⁶⁰ To truly hold space for Two-Spirit people from Nations across the Americas is not just representation, but collaboration through the acknowledgement of ancestral ways of being. Bobby's music as curriculum reminds listeners to advocate for Two-Spirit and trans Native artists across Turtle Island and Abya Yala (Central and South America).

Bobby also utilizes the word "qariwarmi," which is her People's word for Two-Spirit. As she deploys "qariwarmi," she contextualizes it in many ways across her tracks.

Two-Spirit Mi'kmaw professor of sociology and social anthropology Margaret Robson

²⁵⁹ Conversation with Bobby Sanchez on August 14, 2024.

²⁶⁰ Phelan, Pétá. "Indigenous LGBTIQA+ Existences, Safety, & Wellbeing as a Critical Component of Truth and Justice Commissions in Australia." *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2023, pp. 1-16, p. 9.

explains that there was often a third dialect among communities that Two-Spirit people knew.

If some two-spirit people had duties as multi-dialect speakers then it seems logical to me that they would be heavily impacted by colonial processes targeting Indigenous language capacity.²⁶¹

Bobby is not only placing herself within a lineage of Two-Spirit people, but by using ancient language of Two-Spirit people she is “protecting Indigenous languages, cultures, and the land upon which these all depend.”²⁶²

Prioritizing Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer voices at Native events is imperative because it brings back ancestral ways of being, knowing, and doing. Cree and Saulteaux Native governance scholar Gina Starblanket argues that, “many treatments of ‘the community interest’ take the existence of a collective Indigenous voice and vision for granted, oversimplifying and universalizing the different objectives and priorities of Indigenous people within the collective.”²⁶³ While issues like land and water rights do impact multiple communities, learned patriarchy has also pushed aside ancient ways of being for heteronormative ones. Bobby’s music not only shares Native knowledge within queer and trans communities, but her hip hop bundles also do the work of Native hip hop pedagogy within the Native hip hop scene itself. In speaking about “Indigenous LGBTQ and two-spirit traditions,” Anishinaabe writer and activist Niigaan Sinclair argues that

²⁶¹ Robinson, Margaret. “Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 67, no. 12, 2020, pp. 1675–1690, p. 1677.

²⁶² Ibid, p. 1677

²⁶³ Starblanket, Gina. “Complex Accountabilities: Deconstructing ‘the Community’ and Engaging Indigenous Feminist Research Methods.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2018, pp. 1–20, p. 3.

These narratives are about the future, time-travel, and other worlds. They are visions and re-visions of a complete and full Indigenous tomorrow.²⁶⁴

Bobby provides rematriated curriculum that honors ancient ways of Two-Spirit folks, and critically, Native hip hop pedagogy rooted in the vast array of gender diversity across Nations builds Two-Spirit futures.

The 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour

Def-i grew up in Shiprock, NM, on the Navajo Reservation. As a kid, he never could have dreamed of being asked to come back to give a week-long workshop to the community that raised him. Through a New Mexico grant catered toward cultural engagement, he was given the opportunity to return in July 2024. Created by Def-i, the 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour offers youth the chance to engage in all of hip hop culture. Over the course of a week, students receive hip hop bundles and cultivate a deeper understanding of the possibilities of Native artistry.

A few weeks after this workshop, we had a conversation where he spoke about his time in Shiprock.

Bro, it felt great, because it was like, a full circle moment or something like that. The first DJ who brought me in was named DJ Cedro. He's from Shiprock too. Actually, he's from Sweetwater, Arizona, but he built his own sound system a long time ago in the 80s, and he was one of the few DJs that actually had mad crates in Shiprock. He had almost the same setup as some of the DJs in New York, like with the big systems. And he would throw his own jams, and he was the first one to ever let us get down on the mic. And he also was playing some of the records, and I remember him back then, and like way back, talking to us. Like,

²⁶⁴ Sinclair, Niigaan. "Returning to Ourselves: Two Spirit Futures and the Now." In Nicholson, Hope ed. *Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*. Bedside Press, 2016, pp. 12–19, p. 18.

“imagine if somebody sampled this right now.” And he played the old chant records. And it’s like, wow, fast forward now it’s here, you know [referencing A Tribe Called Red first sampling chant records]. But so going back there, it like reminds me of him, because there was a moment in time where we had a teacher give students records. And now I had a moment where I was able to give him my records. Give the students my records. It reminded me of all of that and just being able to inspire the youth and for them to like, still feel the connection to hip hop and to feel a connection to the elements of hip hop, the cultural parts... But it felt really good to go there with other hip hop artists. One of them is from Shiprock too, [bboy] Shuga Shane, he’s part Diné. But you know, going there and representin’ with all elements is a dream come true, because it’s easy for me to present and go to places and talk about the elements of hip hop, but I can only do so much as an emcee and a rapper. I’m not like a world renowned dancer, like some of them are, or beatboxer like Lady Say What or producer or DJ. So to have like all elements in the same place together, it creates this synergy that can really transcend, I think, into other worlds and other dimensions. And I think spirits can really take notice, and they’ll be able to help along the way. But it’s like this creative, Creator energy that is there and that is prevalent. And that’s like, I think that’s what it’s all about sometimes, as well as having fun and having peace and unity together. So for us all to be there and teaching the students for a week, especially as someone who grew up there, it’s like you can actually manifest your dreams and goals and like, help change things. Hip hop gave us that and we are giving that back to the next generation.²⁶⁵

The next stop on the 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour was Gallup, NM, about two hours west of Albuquerque.

Straddling I-40 just between the Diné land and the Zuni Reservation, I pulled up to Juggernaut Music, a music store where the “Hip-Hop Community Cypher and Jam” was

²⁶⁵ Transcription from a conversation on August 14, 2024.

taking place. Beyond the instruments for sale was a large room with a stage that had recently hosted acts such as Chicano rapper Mr. Capone-E. As I walked into the venue area, one of Def-i's team, Shuga Shane, came up and introduced himself to me. "You on the Rez now homie," he said. Shane grew up with Def-i in Shiprock, NM, and while Gallup is not technically on the reservation, the vast majority of people who live there are Native. The team was putting on a community hip hop jam and cypher. Many of the students the team had been working with throughout the week came out, along with their families. It was a free space for the students to break with their teachers outside of their workshop space.

DJ Noble was bumping old school hip hop hits from Pete Rock & CL Smooth's "They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.)" to funk tracks like Tom Browne's "Funkin' for Jamaica (N.Y.)." A hip hop elder in his 60s was there with a walking cane, but just like out of a movie, when "Funkin' for Jamaica" came on, he dropped his cane and started breaking. We all created a circle for the breakers, and one at a time, they went in and passed it on to the next. Some of the kids who were more shy got accompanied by the teachers, creating beautiful moments of intergenerational connection.

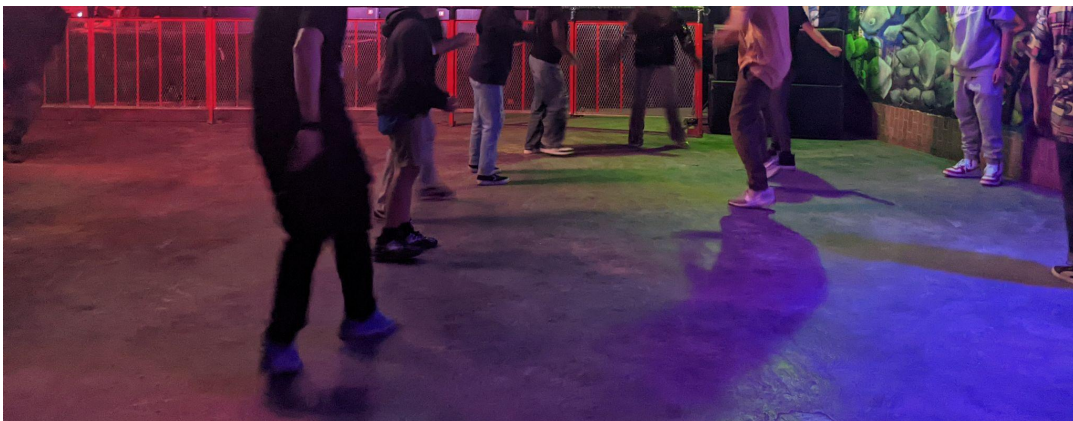


Figure 20: Image taken by author from the Hip-Hop Community Cypher and Jam at Juggernaut Music in Gallup, NM on August 23, 2024. Image cropped for anonymity.



Figure 21: Image taken by author from the Hip-Hop Community Cypher and Jam at Juggernaut Music in Gallup, NM on August 23, 2024. Image cropped for anonymity.



Figure 22: Image taken by author from the Hip-Hop Community Cypher and Jam at Juggernaut Music in Gallup, NM on August 23, 2024.

These workshops center land as pedagogy in critical ways. Returning to Grande's third goal of red pedagogy, it embodies "the institution of Indigenous efforts to reground students and educators in traditional knowledge and teachings." Regrounding, or relanding, is both a consequence of decolonization (returning to ourselves) and of ancestral dance. While picking up one's feet is a basic requirement for any dance style, many traditional Native styles have an element of the hop. When walking, one might plant their feet in front of the other, but to hop requires a land-ing more akin to a fall. Recollet asserts that

Choreographies of the fall include gestures that reflect the layered strata in our atmospheric relations...Land-ing is an Indigifuturist experience of the slipstream of diaspora. There is a stillness to land-ing, a restive quality to the choreographies of the fall.²⁶⁶

Breaking embodies many of the same elements of Native dance as Def-i explained earlier. Land-ing both on the floor and on the beat is a process of regrounding to "atmospheric relations" of the past, present, and future. As the 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour travels from community to community, teaching students the art of land-ing through breaking and hip hop culture is a powerful pedagogical tool. While this process can be impactful in cities as well, regrounding students in the land their ancestors inhabited—specifically the Southwest in this example—builds Native futures through hip hop bundles.

As the cypher continued, the teachers were constantly encouraging the students. Shuga Shane and another teacher, Cyrus, kept yelling out, "just keep movin' to the beat y'all" or "the beat don't stop so neither do you." There is a juxtaposition that simultaneously exists between the stillness of land-ing as Recollet described and the constant motion of the

²⁶⁶ Recollet, Karyn. "Choreographies of the Fall: Futurity Bundles & Land-Ing When Future Falls Are Immanent." *Theater*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2019, pp. 89–106, p. 93.

beat. Popping and locking require a balance of the two, while understanding that the choreography one creates brings the past forward through ancestral dance practices and hip hop history. As one student finished and left the center of the cypher, another would jump in. That moment of transition, where a new student literally jumps into the cypher, creates a critical moment of land-ing. As Recollet argued, “[t]here is a stillness to land-ing, a restive quality to the choreographies of the fall.”²⁶⁷ This moment of land-ing has stillness through community. It is an arrival at the center of the cypher where one is surrounded by a community that stills time itself as a process of returning to one’s self. Native hip hop bundles passed through the cypher reground students to the land through land as pedagogy that are not tied to colonial institutions. Hip hop music—and hip hop culture more broadly—allows students to express their identity, giving them tools to continue to Indigenize the world around them and often leading them back to themselves. Passed on by practitioners such as Def-i and his team, these bundles are encoded with knowledge across space and time, laying the groundwork for building futures through Native hip hop pedagogy.

Part 2: The Passing of Language

Just as Native hip hop builds community through educational outlets centering the passing of knowledge, it can also teach language, both on the ground and through the Native technosphere. In this section, I turn to Latin America and the Indígena diaspora that crosses colonial borders. I argue that, because of the density of rapped lyrics, Native hip hop in ancestral languages can teach a broader range of vocabulary and grammar than other

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 93

lyrically sparser genres. As I have argued elsewhere, “[d]igital media is quickly becoming an important space for language revitalization and for Indigenous knowledge more broadly”²⁶⁸ (Caranto Morford and Ansloos 2021; Coronel-Molina 2019; Farfán and Cru 2020; Galla 2017; Meighan 2021; Outakoski 2018). When these tracks are uploaded to digital spaces, Native hip hop bundles can reach language learners far beyond the reach of a language course on the ground. Because of continued Latin American migration, Native language diasporas geographically displaced from their ancestral homelands can learn their languages through the affordances of the Native technosphere.

Anti-Lengua Indígena Rhetoric and the Power of Native Hip Hop Bundles

Almost seventy years after my abuelita’s own education in the 1930s and 1940s, the “Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indios” (LGDLPI, General Act on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples) was passed in 2003, meant to preserve Native languages as well as promote bilingual education.²⁶⁹ México currently has sixty-eight constitutionally recognized languages.²⁷⁰ Many community members have taken it upon themselves to do the work of language revitalization using platforms such as hip hop. My abuelita has passed, but listening to artists that use the Hñähñu language has allowed me to

²⁶⁸ Francese, Jonah. “Language Revitalization through Indigenous Mexican Hip Hop: Building towards an Indigenous Hip Hop Futurism.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2024, pp. 9–21, p. 12.

²⁶⁹ de León, Lourdes. “Indigenous Language Policy and Education in Mexico.” In McCarty, Teresa L. and S. May eds. *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education. Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Cham: Springer, 2017, pp. 415–433, p. 417.

²⁷⁰ PINALI. *Programa de revitalización, fortalecimiento y desarrollo de las lenguas indígenas nacionales. 2008-2012*. Mexico: INALI, 2009, p. 17. Retrieved from: <https://www.inali.gob.mx/pdf/PINALI-2008-2012.pdf>.

continue the process of learning, and given me a sense of community that I do not have through geographical means.²⁷¹

While México does recognize many Native languages, the percent of speakers within the communities themselves are still falling. According to the 1900 census, 15.2% of México's population spoke a Native language.²⁷² Over one hundred years later, the 2020 census indicates that the percent of Native language speakers is down to 6.1%.²⁷³ Despite the passing of the 2003 LGDLPI law, a continued declining trend in speakers makes language revitalization an imperative issue that many community activists and artists have decided to tackle in their own ways by passing hip hop bundles through digital media.

On June 6, 2022, fourteen-year-old Juan Pablo Zamorano arrived at Telesecundaria 6 “Josefa Vergara” high school in the city of Santiago de Querétaro, Querétaro, México.²⁷⁴ Later that day, during class, two students sprayed alcohol on a chair and coaxed him to sit down. Juan Pablo felt something wet and stood up, only to have one of the students throw a lit match at him, engulfing him in flames. Acting quickly as the fire was currently contained to his pants, he took his pants off, but he was already severely burned. His teacher took him to a local clinic, where he was treated for his wounds and sent home. After being home by himself for hours, his father (a construction worker) and his mom (who sold dulces in the plaza) finally arrived and saw their son.

²⁷¹ Importantly, just because I am on this journey, does not mean that I have been accepted by the Hñähñu community. That is, and will always be, up to them.

²⁷² Retrieved from:

<https://indigenousemexico.org/state-of-mexico/the-nahuatl-language-of-mexico-from-aztlan-to-the-present-day/>.

²⁷³ Retrieved from: <https://www.iwgia.org/en/mexico.html>.

²⁷⁴ While I was first alerted to this story through an account I follow on Instagram, an article can be found at: <https://www.sopitas.com/noticias/caso-juan-pablo-nino-otomi-quemado-escuela-queretaro/>.

Juan Pablo is Otomí and speaks Hñähñu. Since February of 2022, he had been asking his parents if he could transfer to a different classroom due to severe bullying for not being fluent in Spanish. Despite them asking the school to allow a transfer, the principal refused, citing a lack of evidence. Sadly, Juan Pablo reported that the teacher of his classroom was also bullying him, and allowed her students to do what they wanted with no repercussions. Even on the day of the hate crime, the school did not notify Juan Pablo's parents. They came home like any other day, to see their son with third-degree burns and bandaged up just for speaking Hñähñu. Given the area of the Otomí ancestral homelands, many of the students could, in fact, be Otomí, even the ones who set Juan Pablo on fire. However, due to the continued colonization through mestizaje, language erasure, and Mexican nationalism, lenguas indígenas [Native languages] often hold great shame in the Mexican public eye.

Hip hop duo Membda—consisting of Hector Polvadera and Israel Ñonthe—uses their music to fight for visibility and erase shame around Hñähñu. Although Polvadera and Ñonthe both grew up speaking Hñähñu, Polvadera was more fluent and was already making music in the language when they met.²⁷⁵ In an interview with *Vice* in 2017, Polvadera explained:

For me Hñähñu is the only ancestral heritage I have, a tool to communicate with my “elders,” it is the blood in the veins, the reflection of our worldview, perhaps many ancestral practices have been lost, perhaps we no longer dance or worship our gods, but in this language our thoughts are developed.²⁷⁶

In 2021, Membda released two new albums. When announcing the first, *Manjoti*, they explained that after having felt sorrow and adversity during a year of quarantine due to

²⁷⁵ López, Mixar. “Humildad y Herencia Ancestral: Una Entrevista con Membda.” *Vice*. August 9, 2017. <https://www.vice.com/es/article/qvvnwm/humildad-y-herencia-ancestral-una-entrevista-con-membda>.

²⁷⁶ Ibid and translation mine.

covid-19, this album “is a battle cry that will be an echo of many voices and will resonate in infinite places, to make known to everyone that our roots are more alive and strong.”²⁷⁷ The first track, “Hanja,” talks explicitly about how their people are perceived and treated by the settler state of México.²⁷⁸

Hanja gui ena gue ma hñaki sha ntso?

Why do you say that my language is horrible?

Hanja gui ena ma hnini sha ntso?

Why do you say that my town is horrible?

Hanja gui ena gue ma gi sha ntso?

Why do you say that my blood is horrible?

Nu'i hingui padi te hma hotho?

Do you not know how beautiful it is?

Nu ma ye sha mboi

My hands are black

Nu ma hua sha mboi

My feet are black

Nu ma hmi sha mboi

My face is black

Gue a bi tzati ra hyadi

*It's because the sun has burned me.*²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Translation mine. Retrieved from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKrR5d9FIv/>.

²⁷⁸ As I translate these lyrics, please know that I am still on my journey learning this language. I acknowledge this for two reasons: first, language is sacred and I do not mean to disrespect it through translation mistakes; and second, I think it is also important to be honest that language revitalization is a process, and mistakes are part of the journey to fluency.

²⁷⁹ Membda - Topic. “Hanja.” *YouTube*. February 7, 2021.
https://youtu.be/tYWZ_7GKDPk?si=WZO2ZT7XIVWnY-SG.

Later in the first verse, they rap, "I am an Indigenous, I speak Hñähñu without shame"

[*"Nuga dra indígena di Hñähñu sin pena"*].²⁸⁰ A later verse echoes Polvadera's interview:

Handi ma nfadi hanja ga tuta'i

Look at my knowledge how I sing it to you

Ga hoki ra nfeni ma hamu nu ma mui

Always remembering my ancestors

Gue a bi 'raki' ra tsedi ne ra maka nfeni

*They are the ones who gave me strength and good knowledge.*²⁸¹

Language is but one aspect of Indigeneity, and for many immigrants to the U.S., ancestral language is out of reach due to geographic distance and a lack of speakers. Some equally feel shame about teaching their kids their Native language, just like Spanish was not widely taught to kids of Latin American immigrants in the 1950s and 60s. Hip hop bundles, delivered through YouTube videos and amplified by the connectivity of online communities, can reach a large number of dispersed listeners remarkably quickly. Native language hip hop videos on YouTube have the means to spread much quicker and further than an in-person lecture at a language institute. For example, Membda's Israel Ñonthe founded a digital media channel called *Mis Raíces, Mi Pueblo*, where he has posted instructional videos on the Hñähñu language.²⁸² In a video about verb conjugation posted on March 5, 2019, the geographical range of "likes" and comments was concentrated in the Mexican states of Hidalgo and Guanajuato, but reached as far as the U.S. states of Arizona and Nevada, and even someone living in London.²⁸³ By collapsing geographical boundaries, digital media

²⁸⁰ Many Spanish words have entered the language since the first encounter.

²⁸¹ Membda - Topic 2021

²⁸² The main home for *Mis Raíces, mi Pueblo* can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/raicesdelospueblos/>.

²⁸³ This video can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2028304413955183>.

allows ancestral knowledge to be shared, learned, urbanized, and revitalized in a way not tied to the colonization of land.

Through digital media's allowances for speed through networks of people, these communities can disseminate information and knowledge—not just music and language—through multiple channels.²⁸⁴ Ñonthe also has a YouTube channel composed primarily of traditional food recipes called *Ese Chikitin Mx*.²⁸⁵ For all of his work, he received the “Premio Estatal de la Juventud 2021 en la categoría Fortalecimiento a La Cultura Indígena” (the 2021 State Youth Award in the category Strengthening Indigenous Culture).²⁸⁶ Hector Polvadera won the same award for 2022. It is important to note that I learned of these two other accounts because of listening to Membda. All three of these digital bundles are freely accessible, and presented in a way tied to not only the land but also the people and community through migration.

Native Hip Hop as Language Teacher

Pat Boy is Maya from the Yucatán Peninsula in México. In an interview with Vice, he explains that Maya was his first language, but more people around him started to stray away from speaking as he got older. Hip hop has directly allowed him to reach out to his community's youth. His brother used to return to his village from school with Latine rap CDs as well as U.S. rap CDs of people like 50 Cent and Lil Wayne.²⁸⁷ While Black U.S. hip hop sparked his initial love for the music, he soon realized that he wanted to rap in Maya. He

²⁸⁴ While there is much literature on speed (Tomlinson 2007 and Virilio 1986 for example), I also look to Jessica Swanston Baker book where she discusses the speed and virality of music from St. Kitts (also see Sampson 2012 on virality).

²⁸⁵ The recipe playlist can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpqGdMdIqGkyPVz77ttlakTuVOxrKj6lb>.

²⁸⁶ Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/israel.nonthe/posts/4570731049679136>.

²⁸⁷ Retrieved from: <https://www.vice.com/es/article/rpbym7/a-rapear-en-maya>.

explained how "old people like it for the language" and "young people like it for the genre."²⁸⁸ Therefore, even if it is not traditional music, the act of language reclamation is a powerful enough endeavor to gain the elders' acceptance. Now, he says, people are returning to his village with pride, saying, "soy maya de coraza igual" [I am Mayan with the same armor/strength]. Furthermore, he is counteracting the narrative that Native culture is a kind of relic by utilizing hip hop. Instead, he places Maya in a genre that Mexican youth continually gravitate towards.

Much like Membda, Pat Boy speaks in his songs about his community's way of life and the struggles they face. Drawing on the pedagogical scholarship already mentioned in this chapter, hip hop as a pedagogical tool enables Maya youth to come together collectively to fight the colonial oppression by the Spanish language. Therefore, Native hip hop pedagogy is rooted in hip hop as both kin and survivance. Artists like Pat Boy inspire youth from other communities as well. For example, Juchirap is a hip hop group of high schoolers in México learning Zapotec through lyric writing.²⁸⁹ As listeners of these tracks, Juchirap engaged in tracking the shapeshifting knowledge, ultimately taking on the responsibility of carrying Pat Boy's bundles.

Pat Boy too sees his people getting discriminated against for speaking their language. In an interview from 2021, he says how

Discrimination against Mayas still flourishes in some places. I believe that by generating pride in our origins, we can help combat bullying in schools of children with Mayan

²⁸⁸ Retrieved from:

<https://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/mayan-mcs-transform-a-lost-culture-into-pop-culture/>.

²⁸⁹ Retrieved from: <https://indigenoustmexico.org/census/monolingualism-in-mexico-2010/>.

surnames. I also hope to encourage other young people who are proud of their roots and want to make music that reinforce their identity.²⁹⁰

He goes on to explain that

Society has demanded that little by little, we set aside our Maya customs over the years. In this way, they force us to become more urban, more homogenous, to adopt other traditions. Many families have migrated to other cities and countries and no longer want their children to have a relationship with the Maya culture. To combat this, I also lead workshops for children where I teach them the Mayan language through rap and hip hop. I started doing this in a Yucatán community; I now also teach these workshops in Los Angeles, California, for the children of the Mayas who live in the United States.²⁹¹

Importantly, Pat Boy can do this work because of the Native hip hop bundles he continues to share through digital media, specifically YouTube. Much like Prolific the Rapper's video "Black Snakes," Pay Boy's videos often far exceed his subscriber count. At 5K subscribers, videos like "Sangre Maya" have 216K views. Digital media allows for artists like Pat Boy to spread their message far beyond their geographic location.

While Pat Boy's songs often contain Mayan lyrics, some are more explicit in serving as a language teacher. For example, in his song "X'imbal Kaaj," featuring Yazmín Novelo, he speaks directly to youth and calls for language learning.²⁹²

Way tu petenil Yucatán

Here in the Mayan Peninsula

Tu'ux ku t'aanal le maaya t'aan

Where the Mayan language is spoken

²⁹⁰ Retrieved from:

<https://orato.world/2021/12/30/meet-pat-boy-rapper-using-music-to-rescue-the-mayan-language/>.

²⁹¹ Ibid

²⁹² Rap & Raíz. "X'imbal Kaaj (Video Oficial) - ft. Pat Boy & Yazmín Novelo." *YouTube*. May 31, 2017. https://youtu.be/x9jhD5tyM80?si=ISVmfZSV_vgEkdw.

Teech paal wíinik u'uy le paaxa'

You with the heart of a child, listen to this song

Ko'one'ex kanik le maaya

Let's go learn Maya

Kin taasik yéetel in puksi'ik'al

Which I bring you with all my heart

Ko'one'ex Ko'one'ex kanik paalale'ex

Let's go, let's go children

Tuláakale'ex ku bine'ex tu najil xook

*All of you are students.*²⁹³

A rapper's flow is so important to hip hop. Rap styles vary greatly from chopper to triplets to rhyming on the snare to rhyming off the snare to alliteration. While Pat Boy takes flow into consideration, he raps much slower on tracks like "Xíimbal Kaaj" than "Sangre Maya," for example. The slower the rap, the more accessible it is to beginning language learners. Moya et al (as cited in Vila 2021)²⁹⁴ argue that learning vocabulary through music "make[s] it much easier to imitate and remember language than words which are 'just spoken.'"²⁹⁵ They also cited a study (Rainey & Larsen 2002)²⁹⁶ that found "participants showed better long-term memory when a series of words were sung rather than presented in the spoken version."²⁹⁷ While rapping can be argued as just speaking in rhyme, I contend that because

²⁹³ I translated the Spanish translation into English, but the Mayan lyrics and Spanish translation are retrieved from: <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Pat-Boy-feat-Yazmin-Novelo/X%C3%ADimbal-Kaaj>.

²⁹⁴ Vila, Berta Torras. "Music as a Tool for Foreign Language Learning in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education. Proposing Innovative CLIL Music Teaching Approaches." *CLIL Journal of Innovation and Research in Plurilingual and Pluricultural Education*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2021, pp. 35–47, p. 38.

²⁹⁵ Moya, A. et al. *La Ense Anza de la Lengua Extranjera en la Educación Infantil*. Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2003, p. 75.

²⁹⁶ Rainey, D., & Larsen, J. D. "The Effect of Familiar Melodies on Initial Learning and Long-term Memory for Unconnected Text." *Music Perception*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, pp. 173–186, p. 184.

²⁹⁷ Vila 2021, pp. 38–39

of the beat and the rapper's flow, musical elements like rhythm and background harmony contribute to language acquisition through hip hop just as much as the music used in those studies. Due to its higher density of lyrics compared to other genres, however, hip hop can teach more vocabulary and grammar in the same amount of recorded music.

In Pat Boy's music video for "Xímbal Kaaj," there is a group of youth surrounding him throughout the video.²⁹⁸ The music itself is not the sole language learning tool, but the very making of the video encodes a sense of community, which language happens to be one aspect of. In regards to Native language learning, ethnomusicologist Jessie Vallejo argues that music "facilitates the daily use of language in and outside the classroom, and learning and performing music promotes the building of social relationships and intergenerational interactions."²⁹⁹ Pat Boy's music and workshops operate outside of settler-colonial educational systems and function as curriculum. Returning to Grande, Pat Boy's language education inherently deploys red pedagogy because it pushes back against institutions (churches, boarding schools, and more) that used language erasure as a primary means of colonization and the loss of ancestral traditions. For his community work through language and hip hop, he received the Linguapax International 2022 award, sponsored by the United Nations, in recognition of his efforts to preserve linguistic diversity.

Language Pedagogy and Hip Hop Literature

"Este libro fue producido a las faldas del Pichincha" [This book was made on the slopes of Pichincha] writes Kichwa rapper Sumay Cachimuel. In 2021, Cachimuel—a member of the

²⁹⁸ Rap & Raíz 2017

²⁹⁹ Vallejo, Jessie M. "Revitalising Language through Music: A Case Study of Music and Culturally Grounded Pedagogy in Two Kanien'ke:Ha (Mohawk) Language Immersion Programmes." *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2019, pp. 89–117, p. 92.

Kichwa hip hop group Los Nin—published a mixed-media book titled *Kill Kay Pacha*, which seeks to engage with Kichwa youth through language pedagogy. Not only is the book bilingual (Kichwa and Spanish), but it also includes several QR codes that readers can scan. These QR codes direct you to the beats of each track, so you can not only rap along using the lyrics in the book itself, but can also write and rap your own lyrics. I argue, then, that not only do many Native hip hop artists provide texts that center language preservation and return ways of life to Native Peoples, but that mixed media texts such as Cachimuel’s *Kill Kay Pacha* serve as bundles of knowledge and also allow participants to actively engage in creative writing through literary practices. *Kill Kay Pacha* is critically a physical manifestation of a Native hip hop bundle wrapped or bound by a cover.

Native literature has a long history of reflecting the vast array of Native life. For example, memoirs such as Ma-Nee Chacaby’s *A Two-Spirit Journey*,³⁰⁰ Billy-Ray Belcourt’s *A History of My Brief Body*,³⁰¹ and Joshua Whitehead’s *Making Love with the Land*³⁰² center Indigiqueerness. There are also books that tackle the M.M.I.W.G.2S. pandemic such as Nick Medina’s *Sisters of the Lost Nation*,³⁰³ and the anthology of voices called *Kwe: Standing With Our Sisters*.³⁰⁴ Finally, Jessica Hernandez’ *Fresh Banana Leaves*³⁰⁵ and Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* address ecological warfare and extractive industries. Native hip hop as literature also provides texts that offer reflections on the ways in which Natives are impacted, yet at the same time sounds them in a way that literature cannot.

³⁰⁰ Chacaby, Ma-Nee, and Mary Louisa Plummer. *A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder*. University of Manitoba Press, 2016.

³⁰¹ Belcourt, Billy-Ray. *A History of My Brief Body*. Two Dollar Radio, 2020.

³⁰² Whitehead, Joshua. *Making Love with the Land: Essays*. First University of Minnesota Press edition. University of Minnesota Press, 2022.

³⁰³ Medina, Nick. *Sisters of the Lost Nation*. Berkley, 2023.

³⁰⁴ Boyden, Joseph. *Kwe: Standing With Our Sisters*. Penguin Canada, 2014.

³⁰⁵ Hernandez, Jessica. *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science*. North Atlantic Books, 2022.

As a hip hop text that requires both reading and listening, *Kill Kay Pacha* addresses multiple modes of language transmission (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). As Vallejo has argued, it is critical to create “decolonised educational spaces that promote language fluency and Indigenous student success.”³⁰⁶ By targeting the many components of language learning, Cachimuel’s book builds connections in language learning through hip hop literature. *Kill Kay Pacha* also connects multiple communities—it connects listeners/readers with other fans of Los Nin, with other Kichwa language learners, and, most importantly for this chapter, with the diaspora who are geographically displaced and in the process of reconnecting. Building a bridge between the physical and the digital media, *Kill Kay Pacha* as a multi-media Native hip hop bundle crosses borders when the body often cannot. Kichwa anthropologist and activist Amy Killari Chálan posits that “Los Nin, based in-between Boston and Otavalo, opened paths for a new generation who identified with transnational influences and a commitment to cultural revitalization.”³⁰⁷ Chálan addresses the complexities of migration by quoting Kichwa rapper Inti in a conversation between them: “One becomes disenchanted with one’s territory if one does not know [their] language.”³⁰⁸ As Inti says, the language holds the knowledge of land and community. Language tells of plant medicine, of gastronomy, of cosmologies, and so much more.

Because of schooling (Christian missionaries, Indian Boarding Schools, and Residential Schools), Native languages were targeted through the settler curriculum, making projects such as *Kill Kay Pacha* imperative toward the return of ways of life to

³⁰⁶ Vallejo 2019, p. 92

³⁰⁷ Chálan, Amy Killari. *Indigenous Futurisms: Kichwa Hip-Hop and Contemporary Cultural Activism in the Andes*. [B.A. thesis, Harvard University]. 2023, p. 84.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 103

Natives. Hip hop literature holds great power as Native hip hop pedagogy. Community created, it crosses borders and weaves itself through the diaspora, serving as a tether. Once the bundle itself is unwrapped, diasporic readers/listeners are gifted relations that require responsibility and connection. As kin, hip hop as pedagogy shifts our understanding of curriculum.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how Native rappers engage in Native hip hop pedagogy that passes Native hip hop bundles. The ways in which these rappers disseminate knowledge aligns with a “curriculum [that] is theorized with, not on, communities.”³⁰⁹ As Sabzalian explains, “such aims are land- and place-based, relational, intergenerational, and beholden to community knowledge, remembrance, and learning.”³¹⁰ By theorizing with the community, Native rappers offer up educational practices that are not tied to colonial ways of teaching knowledge. On the ground, curriculum can take many forms. Performances at venues, festivals, and workshops all offer ways for the community to engage with hip hop in a broader scope of Indigeneity. As many of these events are not centered around hip hop, attendees are given a curriculum that places hip hop within the fabric of Native life. Digital spaces, on the other hand, allow for diasporic Natives—often disconnected geographically because of migration—not only to listen to hip hop, but also to reconnect to their community and culture. As Eve Tuck reminds us, these types of rematriated curricula build

³⁰⁹ Sabzalian, p. 372

³¹⁰ Ibid

towards the “redistribution of power, knowledge, and place, and the dismantling of settler colonialism.”³¹¹

While this chapter has used the term “pedagogy” in many forms (specifically red and rematriated), I want to make clear that “pedagogy” has been primarily theorized within academia by Native scholars. Of course, I need to build off Native scholarship, and I honor the work that has been done. At the same time, none of the people I have talked to have used the term “pedagogy.” They speak of teaching and of learning. They speak of passing and preserving knowledge. Some do speak of decolonization, but that is never rooted in “pedagogical” language.

Hip hop does offer a different path than other forms of passing knowledge. Pat Boy says that for him, the youth come for the music and the elders come because of the Mayan language. Many elders across disparate Nations have mixed feelings about hip hop and how this next generation is gravitating towards it. Whether it is language specifically or other parts of Native culture, hip hop rooted in the land and the community guides listeners to bring ancestral ways of being forward. Native hip hop, as its own relation, creates a bridge across generations.

Multiple things can be true at once. Native hip hop can encompass red/rematriated pedagogy, but it can also be rooted in anti-Blackness, misogyny, and other harmful narratives. Both of these bodies of knowledge do get passed on through Native hip hop bundles, and to say that Native hip hop is exclusively liberatory as a pedagogical practice is to ignore how colonization—and learned misogyny, homophobia/transphobia, and anti-Blackness—has impacted Native communities. Native hip hop that directly represents

³¹¹ Tuck 2011, p. 37

the patriarchy, phobias around gender and sexuality, and caricatures of Blackness is vehemently contradictory to the pedagogical affordances mentioned in this chapter. Language, and Black language specifically, is one aspect of the potential harm. Hip hop scholar H. Samy Alim argues that “as Hip Hop Culture continues to be adopted/adapted by heads all over the world, the syncretization of local street languages and black American language practices has produced multiple HHNL [Hip Hop Nation Language] varieties.”³¹² While communities across the globe have taken up the appropriation of Black language, there are often many visual cues that are coupled with Black language to reproduce harmful stereotypes. Grillz, chains, body movement, and apparel can add nuance to Alim’s claim about language that, in fact, place HHNL within a harmful context.

The Native hip hop bundles that do have liberatory potential are those that center the community, knowledge, and land. Throughout my fieldwork, I have seen these pedagogies in real time. I have watched the eyes of youth light up at a workshop or festival. I have experienced the sense of community that Native hip hop offers, which is rooted in relations and responsibility. Even through all of these teaching moments from the artists in this chapter, I do not claim that Native hip hop can end colonization. While liberation and return of land and life to Native Peoples is the constant goal, hip hop alone is not going to get Native Peoples there completely. However, hip hop artists can address critical issues facing communities through Native hip hop pedagogies. Within the communities themselves, the passing of bundles through Native hip hop pedagogy builds towards a future where ways of life are sustained and thrive. Native rappers use a form of diplomacy as they navigate how to pass knowledge and teach ancestral ways of being through hip hop

³¹² Alim, H.S. *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p 10

as a relation.³¹³ These cultural diplomacies within hip hop itself allow for conversations across generations and for community organizing around how to preserve Native knowledge productions through inter/intratribal relations and the networks with our more/other-than-human kin. Whether through the language of “pedagogy” or otherwise, Native hip hop bundles are curriculum.

Despite so much intergenerational trauma and grief, it is the moments of joy and laughter that create hope. No matter how small, these moments make me remember that there will be a future. The youth attending performances, workshops, and festivals will become language teachers. They will become holders of knowledge. They will become the new ancestors. Native hip hop itself also serves as a pedagogue that works through intergenerational trauma. Making community and land-centered hip hop brings these rappers so much joy, and it also inspires the next generation to continue fighting for the return of life and land through Native hip hop ecologies.

³¹³ Katz, Mark. *Build: The Power of Hip-hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Chapter 3

This is Native Land: Native Hip Hop Ecologies through All Our Relations

The land of enfrackment, gasses extracted and trafficked

hazardous ashes implanted and trapped in a sand pit.

"Land of Enfrackment," Def-i, 2016

The beat drops as Diné hip hop artist Def-i walks through a fracking plant in New Mexico. He stops in front of a building that is tagged with graffiti, where one tag reads "NO FRACKIN WAY." The beat itself is boom-bap, heavy on the kick and cross-stick on the snare. Mixed behind the drum machine is a shaker that is playing steady, straight 16th notes, while the bass rings out with held roots. There is both a piano playing a top-note voicing riff and synth keys floating over the rest of the beat. In the last two beats of the four-bar loop, a synth arpeggiator climbs into the upper register on the A-6/9.

Figure 23: Transcription mine.

In conversation with the technology of the drum machine, the loop making, the synth, and the arpeggiator, Def-i centers the land upon which he grew up. As the fracking plant has

injected toxins into the land, Native hip hop and the Native technosphere can remap settler extractive infrastructure. In the continued loop of the settler-enforced apocalypse, the loop of the beat, coupled with land stewardship, is a way out. The breaks—both the breaks in the beat and the breakbeat itself—serve as ruptures, centering Native hip hop ecologies and the ecologies of Indigeneity.

Native Feminist Land Ethics and Ecologies

I knew it was a big battle to go against a huge company that's trying to build on Native land...but it was a spiritual battle, too. I didn't realize until we actually got out there, but it was like, you performing for the elements out here. You're performing for like the area, performing for the land and performing for like the ancestors in the future, then it started to sink into me, like, this is more than battle rap.

Def-i, 2024

This quote is not just a grounding for the chapter, but a literal grounding in the land and the ecologies that weave through this dissertation. The elements that Def-i speaks of are ever-present in this chapter—the water, the fire, the air, and the land. It is these more/other-than-human relations that guide how artists move through the world and make music. Hip hop, then, is a tool of futurity. It allows these artists to reworld and fight for Land Back. The Native hip hop bundles passed in this chapter hold ancestral knowledge and require a slow unwrapping/unraveling of their content, renewing relations and demanding responsibility through kinship. This chapter is a gathering for Land Back, Native land stewardship, and the process of landing through abolition ecologies. It is also a

gathering for coalition-building between all our relations when extraction, dispossession, and colonial entanglements have severed so many connections. Land-based histories are also violent, as Peoples who once were expansive across geographies were herded into reservations and forced to build connections with new relations. While land-based has been a constant, place-based has different meanings and cannot always be conflated with land. Especially after colonization—and its many continued iterations from reservations, to boarding schools, to the Urban Indian relocation, to the 60s scoop—a return to home is not always possible and requires the constant building of new relations. By reworlding and remapping the forced containments of settler geographies, Native hip hop serves as a rupture, weaving together histories and futures in every Native hip hop bundle. I argue that the land informs hip hop, and hip hop informs the land. Hip hop not only makes kin but is kin, and through relationality, it is a practice of land stewardship. Hip hop, as a relation, as kin, and as a steward of the land, contains ecologies that represent an alternative sonic model that centers relations, community and coalition-building, and connectivity.

As Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence Gross writes, Natives are constantly “in the process of building new worlds—worlds that are true to our history but cognizant of present realities.”³¹⁴ The process of reworlding cannot be void of the histories of extraction and settler infrastructure. Reservations, plantations, the railroad, homesteading, the road system, national parks, boarding schools, redlining, the prison industrial complex, camera/video surveillance, border patrol, and so much more have all been settler infrastructure and tools of “maintenance” as activist, educator, and scholar Eve Ewing has

³¹⁴ Gross, Lawrence. “The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion.” *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, pp. 436–459, p. 449.

explained.³¹⁵ They are also tools of settler futurity. While prison abolition scholar Ruthie Wilson Gilmore talks about settler infrastructure and geographies that have systematically ignored Black people across the U.S. especially in remote areas, this infrastructure has also impacted Urban Native communities through many of these same tools of maintenance.³¹⁶ Drawing on the history of Black/Native solidarity and Native hip hop pedagogy from my first two chapters, hip hop is an abolitionist sonic practice of community preservation. Networks of kinship, coalition-building through community, and reciprocal relationality all sound the land, reworlding and remapping the settler state.

This chapter, then, builds towards a Native hip hop ecology, a land-based hip hop practice that extends the land and these continued histories, but also the People and how they are relations of the land through the lens of Native feminist land ethics. Methodologically, unlike my other chapters, which are rooted in ethnography, here I draw on my own listening to hip hop and on conversations I had with artists. Citationally, I draw on many scholars who work on music that sounds the land—Heidi Aklaseaq Senungetuk (2017), Dawn Avery (2012), Jessica Bissett Perea (2021), Viki Eagle (2024 and 2025), Aaron Fox (2020), Kristina Jacobsen (2017), Sunaina Keonaona Kale (2024), Dylan Robinson (2020), Trevor Reed (2019 and 2021), Maxwell Yamane (2024), and Renata Yazzie (2025). As I move through not just music scholarship but also Indigenized environmental justice and ecology scholarship, I must acknowledge that citing these scholars is not to continue creating a monolith of Native ecology, but rather to help define the breadth of Native hip hop ecology. Native hip hop as a community is vast and

³¹⁵ Family Action Network. “Eve L. Ewing and Ta-Nehisi Coates - Original Sins.” May 23, 2025. https://youtu.be/8U8SwECSzhQ?si=iBrWR_ewJxojo4nr.

³¹⁶ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

inter/intratribal. Thinking with scholars across Nations is a reflection of the Native hip hop scene itself. As Dena'ina musicologist Jessica Bissett Perea argues, “by emphasizing the densities of intertribal-, tribal-, and/or family-specific ways of being, knowing, and doing, easy notions of ‘Indigenous culture’ are instead rendered much more complex and particular.”³¹⁷ When I draw on these scholars who think with their communities and Nations, it is not to conflate Dena'ina, xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah), Hopi, and Diné relationships to sound and listening. Rather, within the inter/intratribal Native hip hop community, these practices add complexity to the messy process of Native hip hop.

I also apply these practices to my citations of Indigenized environmental justice and ecology scholarship. When I draw on scholars such as Kamanamaikalani Beamer, Clint Carroll, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Kyle Whyte, it is not to claim that environmental racism has impacted all Native communities the same. Rather, as Native hip hop travels across geographic space and through digital media, drawing on these scholars and their thinking around land and stewardship can better situate how listeners can place themselves in a relational space, listening to both the land that the Native hip hop artist sounds and the responsibility to the land upon which one lives. It is these gatherings—these cyphers—that require the “densities” of inter/intratribal and familial ways of understanding the world. Citing Kimmerer, for example, is not to read a Potawatomi understanding of the land on the way Def-i makes Diné music in New Mexico. Citing Kimmerer, however, deepens my understanding of coalition-building across Nations and the broader formations of Native futures through hip hop.

³¹⁷ Perea, Jessica Bissett. *Sound Relations: Native Ways of Doing Music History in Alaska*. Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 15.

As I have previously shown, listening as a practice has been theorized by xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) music scholar Dylan Robinson, who argues that “decolonizing musical practice involves becoming no longer sure what LISTENING is.”³¹⁸ Diné ethnomusicologist Renata Yazzie has furthered Robinson by contending that “listening is kinship and kinship is listening.”³¹⁹ My intervention thus lies in the very conception that hip hop is kin, drawing on Robinson, Yazzie, and many Native music scholars, but also ecology scholars thinking about kinship with our more/other-than-human relations. I follow Perea, who argues that

To *Indigenize* sound studies and to *sound* Indigenous studies requires expanding existing analytics of density and audibility to more fully account for constellations of Peoples (ways of being), places/spaces (ways of knowing), and projects (ways of doing) that inform performances of Indigeneity.³²⁰

Hip hop as kin and the sonic relationality it requires of listeners defines a Native hip hop ecology that *sounds* ecological studies, not by conflating different community relationships to land, but through the coalition-building of the cypher. As a culture built on elements, hip hop has historically been rooted in kinship, both in coalition-building and in musical practices. While listening is always kinship, listening to hip hop itself—not just the artists who create it—as a form of kinship deepens our relationship to sound as its own relation.

This chapter comes back to Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, building on my hip hop as pedagogy from chapter two only to return to land as

³¹⁸ Robinson, Dylan. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2020, p. 47.

³¹⁹ Yazzie, Renata. In Yamane, Maxwell (Chair), “Mapping Indigenous Lands and Water through Sound.” Roundtable conversation, *NAISA Annual Conference*, Oklahoma City, OK. June 27, 2025. https://convention2.allacademic.com/one/naisa/naisa25/index.php?cmd=Online+Program+View+Session&selected_session_id=2218128&PHPSESSID=ui92sj4nq031l02totgj05cit0.

³²⁰ Perea 2020, p. 8

pedagogy through Native hip hop ecologies.³²¹ First, I examine extractive industries and show their impact on Native land and reservations. Drawing on community relations, I argue that these histories and lived experiences are inextricably intertwined with some Native rappers' music. Next, I turn to three mujeres indígenas [Native women]—Mare Advertencia Lirika, Janeydi Molina, and Zara Monrroy. Here, I trace how extractive industries cross colonial borders, calling for a transnational analysis and for expanding the necessity of growing ecologies of Indigeneity. Then, I offer a transcription of a listening session I had with Def-i, in which he discussed the inspiration behind two of his tracks, “Water Is Life” and “Don’t Drink the Water.” These tracks tell a community- and family-based history of nuclear terrorism. By tracing a brief history of the impacts of nuclear mines on places like Shiprock and Church Rock, I argue that Def-i uses his music as its own rupture to a settler atomic memory that erases People from its narrative. Finally, I present Ras K’Dee, a hip hop artist and member of the group Audiopharmacy. In this section, I posit Native hip hop as a tool to sound ecological practices. By exploring events such as their performance acting as a soundtrack for an ancestral canoe-making event, I argue that Native hip hop is not just a means of socio-political activism, but can also share ancestral knowledge about the land and our way of living with the land as a relation through broader ecologies of Indigeneity.

Drawing on Native hip hop (red/rematriated) pedagogy, this chapter argues that Native hip hop ecology sounds all of our relations and is its own rupture to the violence of extractive industries. Since the colonial encounter, the settler mindset has had a profound impact—both on and within—Native communities. Cherokee Nation scholar Jenell Navarro

³²¹ Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1–25.

argues that “due to the history of the land being incredibly gendered as female,” it is “thus seen as ‘penetrable,’ ‘rapable,’ and ultimately in need of domination.”³²² In order to combat these settler ideologies, Navarro calls for a Native feminist land ethic. She contends that

A Native feminist land ethic, therefore, challenges all of us to build alliances across Native and non-Native communities, and to enact a radical relationality with the land that transcends the settler state’s power and processes of recognition and legitimation (e.g. the borders that divide communities, towns, neighborhoods, and nations).³²³

Through Native hip hop ecologies, alliances, coalition-building, and bundles, Native hip hop artists fight for their land, their ways of life, and their people. Navarro continues that “this Native feminist orientation to the land respects multiple Native land traditions and bodies, thus, coming to consciousness with the land takes place in community.”³²⁴ Coupled with renewing relations, “coming to consciousness with the land” encompasses ways of building for the future centered in relationality.

In many ways, this is not the same land—it is a land depleted and broken by colonization. To renew relations and come to consciousness with the land is to listen to what the land and all of our relations need in order to survive. In a continued state of surveillance, carcerality, and eco-terrorism, abolitionist sonic ecologies are needed to dismantle the entire system. Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes that

After three years of pandemic, amplified fascism, freedom convoys, dying glaciers, misdiagnoses, police killings, children alone in cages at borders, open-air prisons for entire

³²² Navarro, Jenell. “Solarize-ing Native hip-hop: Native feminist land ethics and cultural resistance.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, pp. 101-118, p. 108.

³²³ Ibid, p. 108

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 109

peoples, all in the name of racial capitalism, I'm asking myself: What does it mean to listen to water?³²⁵

I ask, then, what does it mean for hip hop to listen to the land or for the land to listen to hip hop? Therefore, transcending the settler state's processes of legitimation remaps settler geographies/infrastructure, and one way forward is to reworld through Native land stewardship.

Indigenizing Environmental Justice, Extractive Industries, and Hip Hop

The field of environmental justice first gained popularity in 1982, “when a landfill designed to accept PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls, a highly toxic by-product of the chemical industry) was proposed to be placed in Warren County, North Carolina – a predominantly low-income African American community.”³²⁶ As Colville Confederated Tribes scholar Dina Gilio-Whitaker explains, the early years of environmental justice were focused on the intersections of race and toxic waste, culminating in Washington, D.C. for the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. Even as there was increased focus on environmental justice law in the aftermath of this summit, Native voices were not included in the conversations or considered in the resulting legal procedures. The omission of Native input is one reason why mainstream ideas of environmental justice, more broadly, differ from those within Native communities. Gilio-Whitaker contends that “Indigenizing EJ [environmental justice] by centering Native issues means it should conform to principles

³²⁵ Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *Theory of Water: Nishnaabe Maps to the Times Ahead*. Haymarket Books, 2025, pp. 23–24.

³²⁶ Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Beacon Press, 2019, p. 15.

outlined in decolonizing theories and Indigenous research methodologies.”³²⁷ These ontologies not only lay the groundwork for sustainable environmental justice not tied to extractive industries, but also prioritize Native land stewardship. There is extensive scholarship within Indigenous STS—Indigenous Science, Technology, and Society—through scholars such as Kim TallBear (2010), Jessica Kolopenuk (2020), Erin Marie Konsmo and Kahea Pacheco (2016), Max Liboiron (2021), and Kai Recollet. As I work towards a Native hip hop ecology, I place my work in conversation with scholars theorizing Indigenous STS and its relationship to land.

Colonization separated many Natives from both their ancestral land and much of their land-based knowledge of the ecosystems they inhabited. Native environmental justice and decolonization are therefore not just about Land Back from a colonial legal system perspective rooted in land ownership and property, but rather about relearning how to coexist with relations through renewed ancestral ecological knowledge. An ecological regenerative model, as Native Hawaiian and Hawaiian studies scholar Kamanamaikalani Beamer describes, is not a model for the present alone.³²⁸ It takes what the land has given us in the past, informs us on how we should use every part of it, and gives the land back what we just took, looking towards the future. By placing the human as just one small part of the fabric of our ecosystem, it will allow us to follow Quechua Indigenous gastronomy studies scholar Mariaelena Huambachano who contends that, “Indigenous good living philosophies are rooted in cosmovision: a collectivistic, holistic, and spiritual approach to all beings, humans and non-humans (sea, mountains, rivers, etc.), interconnected to the

³²⁷ Ibid, p. 26

³²⁸ Beamer, Kamanamaikalani. “An Aloha ‘Āina Economy—Give, Take, Regenerate.” *The Value of Hawai‘i*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 83–86.

natural world.”³²⁹ These relations go far beyond Western conceptualization of time and space. Mountains were here long before our personal existence, and will be here long after our lifetime. Therefore, thinking relationally and regeneratively will allow us to consistently give back to the land, as our non-human relations also hold knowledge that can guide us toward better practices.

Settlers view the land as profit. As I quoted in chapter one, Black decolonial studies scholar Katherine McKittrick contends that through Black and Native relocation, “the interlocking workings of human worth, race, and space demonstrate the ways the uninhabitable still holds currency in the present and continues to organize contemporary geographic arrangements.”³³⁰ This is not to compare the human conditions of plantations and reservations, but rather I argue that settler eco-colonialism used the land for profit in similar ways through extractive industries. Crop plantations aided in the desecration of the biodiversity the land needs, while fracturing and other forms of mining near reservations equally destroyed the land and its capacity to be a regenerative relation.

The uninhabitable, or the “middle of nowhere” as deemed by city folks, are the lands that politically have the least power to stop extractive industries. With population sizes as low as one thousand residents, these locations—especially when tied to race—are seen as ideal places to drill and extract from the land. The reservation is often far enough away from cities that it is forced to be self-contained. These contemporary geographic arrangements, as McKittrick calls them, give extractive industries the power to deem the people—most often Black, Indigenous, People of Color—worthless if the land can be

³²⁹ Huambachano, Mariaelena. “Indigenous Good Living Philosophies and Regenerative Food Systems in Aotearoa New Zealand and Peru.” In Duncan, Jessica et al. eds. *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable and Regenerative Food Systems*, 2020, pp 38–49, p. 38.

³³⁰ McKittrick, Katherine. “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2013, pp. 1–15, p. 6.

profitable. Because of these “interlocking workings of human worth, race, and space,” rich white living areas would never be a location to spill toxic waste, while reservations are targeted.³³¹ Through McKittrick’s theorization of plantation futures, I argue that to think about reservation futures is to Indigenize these spaces and free them from their colonial subjugation.

If we are to reimagine the future of reserve/reservation land, we must first break away from the extractive industries that continue to invade these lands. Since the early treaties, subsequent broken treaties, and the creation of the reservation system, Potawatomi food sovereignty and environmental justice scholar Kyle Whyte explains that the U.S. “forced Indigenous peoples to take on corporate government structures that incentivized Tribal government leaders to depend on and buy into extractive industries and other capitalist enterprises.”³³² Changes in Native ways of life caused by extractive industries forced the loss of knowledge, traditions, and relations to the land. Reclaiming stolen land aids in building Native futures by returning to ancestral ways of knowing, teaching, and communicating with relations that are not tied to a colonial-capitalist infrastructure.

Abolitionist sonic ecologies also lend themselves to a regenerative model of Native land stewardship. Abolition not only can be read on extractive industries that continue to take from the land, but also on the hyper-policing of sites like the Dakota Access Pipeline. Water and land protectors are criminalized and treated as illegal protestors on their own land. Being a water protector or land defender creates a real threat that one will be

³³¹ Ibid, p. 6

³³² Whyte, Kyle. “Indigenous Climate Change Studies : Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene.” *English Language Notes*, s. l., vol. 55, no. 1, 2018, pp. 153–162, p. 155.

incarcerated and have to pay immense legal fees. As I showed in the introduction, just for documenting at Standing Rock, Prolific the Rapper faced nine years in prison. Water and land protectors are therefore directly embodying the land on which they reside. As Def-i will explain later, he used his music to raise \$1.8 million for legal defense fees. Similarly, many Native hip hop artists use their music to embody the land. Because they are members of their Nation first, these issues often directly impact their friends, family, and Nation. As water protectors and land defenders themselves, these abolitionist sonic ecologies are critical to understand hip hop as kin. The tracks are their seeds, wrapped in a beat. When viewed as bundles of knowledge, histories and communal memory are woven into the fabric of reworlding.

Within hip hop studies and Native studies more broadly, there has yet to be robust traction around hip hop ecologies (Cermak 2012; Müller and Durand 2022), let alone a Native hip hop ecology. At the intersection between cultural ecology and Native Alaskan hip hop, intermediality studies scholar Nassim Balestrini contends that “ecocritical readings of Indigenous hip-hop require a non-universalizing approach to space, place, and relationality.”³³³ Building off this scholarship, a Native hip hop ecology is a land-based hip hop practice that is an extension of the land, the continued eco-histories that face Natives, and community/relational practices that are rooted in human and more/other-than-human relations alike. Equally stemming from Native environmental justice perspectives, Native hip hop ecologies are regenerative through community storytelling and the passing of knowledge. The passing and gifting of these hip hop bundles aim to sever ties with

³³³ Balestrini, Nassim Winnie. “The Cultural Ecology of Alaskan Indigenous Hip Hop: ‘Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan (I Love You My People).” *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2022, pp. 55–72, p. 57.

extractive industries, building a future in which Natives are stewards of their own ecosystems with a responsibility to care for non-human relations.

Native hip hop ecologies are also an Indigenizing project. As previously mentioned, Prolific raps that he was once in the oil industry until he truly realized the harm it was doing to his community. Similarly, in my conversation with Def-i, he mentioned meeting Native workers in the hydraulic fracturing zones. Diné environmental geography scholars Andrew Curley and Majerle Lister argue that

Although there is truth in the sense that Indigenous peoples are frontline communities, that frontline is more complicated than just the first communities to experience environmental change. It also includes...the fusing of Indigenous futures with extractive industries that is a by-product of decades of assimilation efforts.³³⁴

Native ecological futures first hinge upon breaking free from the extractive industries that have become a fabric of Native life through these “assimilation efforts.” As many reservations are far away from urban areas, extractive industries provide jobs and financial security for workers’ families. These assimilation efforts often blur the harm and colonial impact they are having on communities. Therefore, contending with this history is critical to building futures that return Native ways of life.

Our ancestors never would have conceived of hip hop as a conduit for ancestral knowledge, but we are in the apocalypse, and innovative ways of ensuring futures need to be taken. This apocalypse requires our own warfare. Native hip hop ecology renews Native knowledge in a way that mobilizes the next generation. Native hip hop ecologies allow for

³³⁴ Curley, Andrew and Majerle Lister. “Already Existing Dystopias: Tribal Sovereignty, Extraction, and Decolonizing the Anthropocene.” In Moisio, Sami et al. eds. *Handbook on the Changing Geographies of the State: New Spaces of Geopolitics*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020, pp. 251–262, p. 251.

radical reimaginings of Native ways of life and the renewing of knowledge that can provide a regenerative model for future generations, both on and off the reservation.

Mujeres Indígenas: Rap Originario, Territorio Cuerpo, and Native Feminist Land Ethics

While throughout this dissertation I have argued for a land-based perspective, oftentimes extractive industries complicate those analyses. Much like sound, bodies, and knowledge migrate, for-profit industries do too. This section specifically looks at how extractive industries cross borders and implement the same patterns of harm in multiple Native communities, depleting one area of the land and moving on to the next. Community organizing is often rooted in land-based worldviews, but, as with broader ecologies of Indigeneity, coalition-building across Nations and borders against a singular company requires nuance. While I use the terms “transnationalism” and “border crossing” throughout this section, I mean both these things, one and not the other, so much less, and so much more. As I speak of seeds and People themselves being seeds, relationality and the very concept of kin are equally simple and complex. It is important to view these histories within a transnational/border crossing context in order to understand how companies go “abroad” to extract from the land and People, to avoid taxes and get richer in their pursuit of wealth under capitalism, and to choose non-white locations due to environmental racism. On the other hand, the artists in this chapter are using their very bodies as seeds. As kin, they are breathing medicine into their bundles and reaching their roots through the entanglement of Native hip hop ecologies.

Mare Advertencia Lirika is a Zapotec hip hop artist from Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, México.

In 2004, she founded the first all-women hip hop group in México. When it disbanded in 2009, she began her solo career. Her first solo album included a song called “Mujer Maíz,” which calls out much of the ecological harm that, even in 2010, was being done to pueblos originarios (Native communities). Single-crop farming has long been destroying the land. Contained burns have ancestrally helped Native communities keep soil rich and attract biodiversity, enabling the land to thrive. Due to a combination of these things, Diné and Tsétsêhéstâhese (Cheyenne) Indigenous studies scholar Lyla June Johnston contends that

In a comparative study, over a five-year period, the [Native] production of all crops was 61,750 kilograms/hectare, whereas a nearby colonist agricultural system produced 21,800 kilograms/hectare (Hecht 1992). Moreover, it was found that soils from a single swidden plot could continue to yield food for up to 11 years due to wise timing and selection of crops and a wide variety of continual soil amendment practices. Neighbouring colonial agricultural soils could rarely make it past five years before needing rest.³³⁵

Agricultural biotech companies in the U.S., however, have already depleted much of the farmland due to poor land management. As their capitalist hunger has no bounds, they have crossed the colonial border and begun outsourcing to Mexican—much of it Native—land.

As stated in the title of Lirika’s track, corn is the epicenter. Genetically modified (GMO) corn seeds only serve the extractive industries. These U.S.-based biotech companies, such as Monsanto, import millions of tons of GMO seeds to grow yellow corn specifically, which, although it can be consumed, is mostly sent back to the U.S. to serve as feed for the beef industry or for the corn starch found as corn syrup in many grocery store products.

³³⁵ Johnston, Lyla June. “Native American Regenerative Food and Land Management Systems.” In D’Silva, Joyce and Carol McKenna eds. *Regenerative Farming and Sustainable Diets*. Routledge, 2024, pp. 270–275, p. 273.

Not only are these single-crop farms destroying biodiversity, but due to the natural currents of seed dispersal, these GMO seeds are also negatively impacting surrounding areas that once had more than sixty varieties of corn. Furthermore, Monsanto sends GMO seeds that they specifically develop and then sell, including their own fertilizer. By doing so, they will only buy back products from their own seeds, in essence trapping farmers into loyalty to them. Because extractive industries have a monopoly on the market, poor farmers can only make money if they buy Monsanto seeds. These GMO seeds and fertilizers harm the soil for generations, trapping these farmers as single-crop farmers after the biodiversity of their land is destroyed. In essence, Monsanto makes Native ways of life and caring for the land not a profitable path forward.

Through this song and much of her discography, she uses her self-identification as “una hija de maíz” [a daughter of the corn] to represent a *mujer indígena* [Native woman] perspective on the relationship between land and the body, especially one that is being impacted by a transnational and border crossing project like the corn industry. The transnational extraction of resources requires not only a non-universalizing approach, but it also makes a community-based relational practice critical due to migration. The movement to fight the disappearing seed diversity is also taken up throughout Turtle Island. Through the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA), one of their initiatives is the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network. Their mission is to pass on and teach seed stewardship in order to “protect their seeds from patenting and bio-piracy.”³³⁶ They explain that

across Turtle Island, there is a growing inter-generational movement of Indigenous people

³³⁶ Retrieved from: <https://nativefoodalliance.org/our-programs-2/indigenous-seedkeepers-network/>.

proud to carry the message of the grand rematriation of seeds and foods back into our Indigenous communities. Some of these seeds have been missing from our communities for centuries, carried on long journeys in smoky buckskin pouches, on the necks of peoples who were forced to relocate from the land of their births, their ancestral grounds... Both men and women farm and plant seeds, but their care and stewardship are part of the women's bundle of responsibility.³³⁷

This practice spans across Turtle Island and Abya Yala. Even further south, Maya daykeepers have seed bundles called *tz'ite'* which can be translated to coral bean seeds.³³⁸ Native hip hop bundles, then, offer a way for rappers—especially women emcees—to rematriate ancestral ways of being through their seeds of knowledge. Through their music, they not only take a stand against extractive industries but also highlight the need for Native land stewardship across Turtle Island and Abya Yala. For example, Muskoday First Nation rapper Eekwol has lyrics about planting seeds in her 2005 track “Future Wonders.” Additionally, Nuxalk and Onondaga rapper JB the First Lady has a track called “Planting Seeds” from 2018 which features Eternia and Missy D. Both of these rappers are from Saskatchewan, Canada, but how these women rap about seed sovereignty requires a transnational analysis, wrapping their seeds in bundled tracks and gifting them in many ways. As Lirika continues to build on the ecologies of Indigeneity, she carries her seeds with her to Native communities across the world. On Saturday, March 22, 2025, she performed at the Toronto “Native Women in the Arts” show called “Kwe Performance Series: Voices.” Then on October 11, 2025, Lirika was part of the International Indigenous Hip Hop Fest in NYC. Finally, in February 2026, she headed to Australia to join Noongar and Wongi (Native

³³⁷ Ibid

³³⁸ From a conversation with linguistic anthropologist Roberto Young who works with the Maya Kaqchikel People in Guatemala, February 28, 2025.

Australian Nations) rapper Inkabee at the Sydney Festival. No matter where she goes, however, she carries her seeds with her—both literally through her music but also on her visualizer which is of a field of corn.

As the corn, beef, oil, and other extractive industries deplete the land, the impact is felt by Natives across Turtle Island, México, and further south as well. For Lirika, however, “Mujer Maíz” is a direct attack on continued forms of colonization and violence. According to a transcription by Chicana/o studies scholar Norell Martínez, Lirika raps

es la fuerza que nos une la que viene de la tierra
el maíz es mi semilla por la que gente pelea
la injusticia de los hombres solo trae más violencia³³⁹
it is the force that unites us that comes from the earth
corn is my seed that people fight over
*the injustice of men only brings more violence*³⁴⁰

While Lirika raps that the corn is her seed, later in the song, through the lyric “una hija de maíz,” she also contextualizes herself as a seed. She too is of this land and part of the ecology and all its relations. By presenting a Native hip hop ecology, Lirika fights extractive industries such as Monsanto, which are destroying Native ways of life on both sides of the border, continuing to build transnational solidarity through ecologies of Indigeneity.

Comcáac rapper Janeydi Molina is also deeply invested in both the direct ecology that impacts her community and the ecologies of Indigeneity. In her home of El Desemboque (Haxöl lihom in her language), Sonora, México, she is part of the Comcáac Territory Defenders, a group of mujeres indígenas who protect their ancestral land and

³³⁹ Martínez, Norell. “Indigenous Feminist Hip Hop: Invoking the Maíz Diviner to Denounce Agribusiness in Mexico.” *Chicana/Latina Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, pp. 54–90, p. 76.

³⁴⁰ Translation mine.

cultural rights in the face of extractive industries. This group is made up of “ecologists, turtle specialists, botanists, entomologists and [people from] other fields,” comprising youth activists who “are experts in their territory and traditions.”³⁴¹ In Sonora, the Comcáac “still retain a third of their old territory on the central coast,” making land defense critical yet challenging with only around 1,300 people.³⁴² Molina’s music not only reflects her ties to her community but also the land she defends. As a speaker of cmiiq̃ue iitom, her songs are often both in Spanish and her ancestral language. At a gathering called Xepe An Cöicoos in Punta Chueca, Sonora in 2021, Molina performed a track called “El Poder de la Tierra” [The Power of the Earth].³⁴³ In it, she says

sobre esta guerra, somos los como plantan hasta que no florece
cuando no respetamos y valoramos a madre tierra
about this war, we are like the ones who plant until it doesn't bloom
when we don't respect and don't give value to mother earth

While she goes on to rap in cmiiq̃ue iitom, her lyrics embody a Native hip hop ecology. As a land defender herself, Molina and the Comcáac Nation are at war with the extractive industries that have trespassed into their territory. Seeds and biodiversity are also critical to the Comcáac way of life, and her lyrics “we are like the ones who plant until it doesn't bloom when we don't respect and don't give value to our mother earth” not only connects with “Mujer Maíz,” but also to a more theoretical planting of harm to biodiversity when we go against a relational way of living. While these hip hop bundles are land-based, Molina is also invested in migration and connecting with Comcáac People no longer in Sonora.

³⁴¹ Ogarrío Huitrón, Jesús Ernesto. “The Comcáac: Many Crisis, Only One Hope.” *Voices of Amerikua*, 2020. <https://voicesofamerikua.net/the-comcaac-many-crises-only-one-hope/>.

³⁴² Ibid

³⁴³ The video can be watched at: <https://youtu.be/bv0XwTz5VvY?si=XDbDQ8kH8YPC5KFt>.

Through these broader ecologies of Indigeneity, she has performed traditional songs, taught traditional dances, and led language workshops at Cal State Long Beach, Cal State San Marcos, and UCLA.³⁴⁴

Also from the Comcáac Nation, Zara Monrroy raps in cmiique iitom as well. As a community member, she is part of the Comcáac Ecology Club, an all-women group that not only protects the land but also teaches ways of food and plant medicine. The ongoing infiltration of wellness tourism is appropriating part of this ancestral ecological knowledge. Journalist Jesús Ernesto Ogarrio Huitrón describes that “[t]his is a new tradition that feeds on the knowledge of the Comcáac elders, and the ritual and commercial use of 5MeO-DMT, a powerful psychoactive substance of animal origin.”³⁴⁵ According to the official *Wellness Tourism* website, “wellness tourism provides a platform for showcasing and preserving indigenous cultural traditions.”³⁴⁶ In reality, Native communities do not need tourism to preserve cultural traditions. Their knowledge of plants and ecology, more broadly, thrives by being passed down by elders, not through extractive industries. However, Monrroy and other ecological defenders are fighting to protect this knowledge amid wellness retreats and spiritual journey groups that prey on ancient ecological practices.

Another critical initiative for the Comcáac Ecology Club and other groups, such as Salud Comcáac and El Grupo Tortuguero Comcáac, is preserving the endangered sea turtles that once thrived on the Sonora coast. The coast currently is a “sanctuary for five of the eight surviving species of sea turtles.”³⁴⁷ However, the history of the Sonora coast is complex. Due to the fishing industry in the early 1900s, sea turtles were often accidentally

³⁴⁴ Retrieved from: <https://www.chopo.unam.mx/musica/EstruendoMultilingUe2017.html>.

³⁴⁵ Ogarrio Huitrón 2020

³⁴⁶ Retrieved from:

<https://www.wellnesstourism.com/article/the-impact-of-wellness-tourism-on-local-communities>.

³⁴⁷ Retrieved from: <https://www.saludcomcaac.org/coastalrestoration>.

caught in nets before they could reach shore to lay their eggs. Once captured, fishermen soon realized that they could make almost ten times the amount they could from fish if they sold the turtles instead. Finally, in the early 1990s, the Mexican government officially banned the commercial sale of sea turtle products, but the populations were already dangerously low. Conceived of by a group of Comcáac elders, El Grupo Tortuguero Comcáac was formed in 1999 and has slowly secured a future for the sea turtles of the Sonora coast.³⁴⁸

Within the ecology of the Comcáac Nation, sea turtles not only impact other relations such as the seagrass beds (the Comcáac territory holds “96% of all left in the entire Gulf” of California),³⁴⁹ but they also hold importance within the Comcáac worldview. According to Mayra Estrella, a current member of El Grupo Tortuguero Comcáac,

we are connected to them in some way... We are more tied to the leatherback sea turtle, but we are also connected to the green sea turtle, which, according to our stories, formed the Earth.³⁵⁰

As part of their creation story, the sea turtle is woven into their way of life. On Monrroy’s 2021 album *Viento y Vida*, she has a track called “Creación y Amor” (Creation and Love).³⁵¹ While she too raps in cmiique iitom, the hook talks about creation and honoring the Earth. She sings

Mujer, Tonantzin, Pachamama, espejo,
vida que evoluciona creación, amor,

³⁴⁸ Retrieved from: <https://sacredland.org/tahejoc-and-the-comcaac-territory-mexico/>.

³⁴⁹ Retrieved from: <https://www.saludcomcaac.org/coastalrestoration>.

³⁵⁰ Arellano, Astrid. “Indigenous Comcáac turtle group saves sea turtles in Mexico’s Gulf of California.” *Mongabay*, 2022.

<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/02/indigenous-comcaac-turtle-group-saves-sea-turtles-in-mexicos-gulf-of-california/>.

³⁵¹ “Creación y Amor” can be listened to at: https://youtu.be/gpNJ-l4KgS8?si=wuAR_idQfsJC85No.

abuela, madre, hija, fuerza guerrera, luz en el camino,
diversión todo en uno, creación es el flor, compasión
Woman, Tonantzin, Pachamama, mirror,
life that evolves into creation, love,
grandmother, mother, daughter, warrior strength, light on the path,
fun all in one, creation is the flower, compassion

In the Mexica culture, Tonantzin is a goddess and the mother of the Earth as we know it, and in Quechua, Pachamama is the name for Mother Earth. By referencing Tonantzin, Pachamama, and the warrior strength of a matriarchy (grandmother, mother, daughter), Monrroy not only places herself within this lineage as a *mujer indígena* but she also builds solidarity through ecologies of Indigeneity across borders. Within the Comcáac Nation specifically, all of the organizations mentioned are run by women—Comcáac Territory Defenders, Comcáac Ecology Club, Salud Comcáac, and El Grupo Tortuguero Comcáac. The creation story itself centers on the sea turtle, and so Monrroy is also drawing on the work of these women, including herself, not only in healing the land and its relations, but also in healing the relations her people have with these beings. Through their on-the-ground work and their music, both Molina and Monrroy are renewing relations to the land and ancestral knowledge through their hip hop bundles. They are also invested in renewing (or reconnecting) relations bound to issues that cross the colonial border.

Lirika's newest release, from December 15, 2024, not only continues to echo the silencing of *pueblos originarios* [Native communities], but it also addresses the femicide that exists across the colonial border. In it she raps

Las víctimas luchan por recuperar su historia	The victims fight to recover their history
nombramos en voz alta mantenemos la memoria	we name it out loud we maintain the memory
aunque no hay reparación que compense el daño hecho	although there is no reparation to compensate for damage done
hay un antes y un después de la tortura y es complejo	there is a before and after of torture and it is complex
no solo implica a la víctima directa	it not only involves the direct victim
hay que entender que todo alrededor de la persona afecta	we must understand that everything around the person affects
pues las secuelas dañan también familias	because the consequences also damage families
después de la tortura cómo continuar la vida	after torture how to continue life
no hay una fórmula cada caso es diferente	there is no formula each case is different
pero siempre hay que escuchar a la víctima y lo que siente	but you always have to listen to the victim and what they feel
que pueda nombrar los daños	so that they can name the damage
se rompe el silencio	the silence is broken
se corra la voz y nadie vuelva a pasar por esto	the voice and no one goes through this again
esa es la verdadera cura de este mal	that is the true cure for this evil
en unión romperemos el ciclo de la impunidad	together we will break the cycle of impunity
el miedo hoy ya no nos paraliza	fear no longer paralyzes us today
luchamos contra tortura y hasta encontrar la justicia	we fight against torture and until we find justice

While Lirika does rap about ecological issues as seen in “Mujer Maíz,” she also speaks on a larger ecology of Indigeneity. The femicide in México and around the borderlands is also deeply connected to the M.M.I.W.2S.G. (Missing Murder Indigenous Women Two-Spirit and Girls) movement in the U.S. and in Canada. Within conversations around the femicide in México, the language used is generally broad, focusing on the horrors women face. Because of projects like mestizaje and historical national identity agendas, the communities of these women are rarely accounted for in the media or in reports. Simply reported is that there is a femicide issue in México. With human trafficking

being a huge part of the incidents that lead to death, traffickers have historically targeted Native land because they are more rural and away from government entities. It is reported that in México, “seventy percent of human trafficking victims are Indigenous women,” thus also leading to higher percentages among the femicides.³⁵² According to an extensive study on femicide by Hernández Gress et al, “between 10 and 11 women are murdered every day in Mexico,” one of the highest rates in the world.³⁵³ Similarly, across the U.S. and Canada, Native women are murdered at six times the rate as non-Native women.³⁵⁴

Women, much like the land seen through Navarro in the introduction, are viewed as “‘penetrable,’ ‘rapable,’ and ultimately in need of domination.”³⁵⁵ The relationship between the land and body, especially the land and a woman’s body, has been theorized by Maya Nation scholar Lorena Cabnal. Her “territorio cuerpo” describes the body as a landscape that has relations with all beings.³⁵⁶ In regards to Lirika (and in my view Molina and Monrroy as well), Martínez contends that

for feministas comunitarias, everything is related in the network of life. If women are dying due to violence, this has negative consequences for everyone, because all life is connected. Cabnal affirms in her discussion of territorio cuerpo, “Todos es relacional en la red de la vida. Si se acaban los cuerpos por el femicidio de las mujeres en países como en Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, México, se acaba la vida” [Cabnal, 2017].³⁵⁷ Mare denounces this

³⁵² Eagan, Madison. “Indigenous Women: The Invisible Victims of Femicide in Mexico.” *Harvard International Review*, 2020. <https://hir.harvard.edu/indigenous-women-victims-of-femicide-in-mexico/>.

³⁵³ Hernández Gress, Eva Selene et al. “Femicide in Mexico: Statistical Evidence of an Increasing Trend.” *PLoS ONE*, vol. 18, no. 12, 2023, e0290165.

³⁵⁴ Lengel, Lara Martin, et al. “Indigenous Embodied Activism and Memory Politics for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.” *Howard Journal of Communications*, 2024, pp. 1–22.

³⁵⁵ Navarro 2014, p. 108

³⁵⁶ Cabnal, Lorena. “Para las Mujeres Indígenas, La Defensa del Territorio Tierra es la Propia Defensa del Territorio Cuerpo.” *PBI Estado Español Entrevista*, 2013, pp. 1–7.

³⁵⁷ Cabnal, Lorena. “Especial: Territorio, cuerpo, tierra.” *Eraverdeucr. Youtube*, January 29, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uUI-xWdSAk>.

injustice in her music, making visible that women's lives have value; that they matter, and encourages them to stand up for this injustice.³⁵⁸

Molina and Monrroy also denounce injustice. As Native women involved in ecological organizations who defend the land, they embody a land and community-based relationality in their music. While Lirika brings attention to the terrifying numbers of femicide and to the impact of the corn industry, Molina and Monrroy protect the land against settler mindsets that the land is, as Navarro contended, penetrable and rapable because it has been gendered as female. When the land is seen as "rapable," so are its inhabitants.

Both *territorio cuerpo* and a Native feminist land ethic help frame these rappers who sound their Nation and the land which they defend. For example, the green sea turtle was once a food source for the Comcáac Nation. Due to the current endangered status from poaching and other threats, however, the Comcáac have renewed their relations with the green sea turtle to ensure their larger ecosystem thrives. Thus, renewing relations also renews ways of thinking about the body as a landscape. Landscapes, just like bodies, are constantly changing, and voicing the reasons for those changes is integral to passing bundles through a Native hip hop ecology. Stewarded by *mujeres indígenas*, Native hip hop ecology also crosses borders, generations, and relations. While land-based at its core, these women acknowledge migration and forced migration due to colonial infrastructure. Fighting transnational issues like mining, the corn industry, femicide, detribalization, and more, Lirika, Molina, and Monrroy are all defenders of their people, highlighting how extractive industries continue to prey upon Native Peoples. Their music—the very hip hop bundles that they pass—is a rupture to the extractive industries' act of crossing borders.

³⁵⁸ Martínez 2018, p. 66

Native hip hop ecologies, then, remap settler geographies and call for abolitionist sonic ecologies through Native feminist land ethics.

A Story of Uranium Spills, Pipelines, and Continued Ecological Warfare

On August 14, 2024, Def-i and I hopped in his car after getting lunch from the Grove Cafe and Market in Albuquerque, NM. Throughout my time in the Southwest, he had been trying to show me as much of the city as possible and was excited that we were sitting at the exact table by the window where multiple scenes of the TV series Breaking Bad were filmed. Despite being pop-culturally significant to Albuquerque, I have never seen an episode of Breaking Bad. “Brooooo, are you for real?” he said laughing. “We gotta change that!” With to-go coffees in hand, we rolled out and made the quick five-minute drive back to my Airbnb. It was over 100 degrees out, but the Native adobe architecture of the Tiwa-speaking Pueblos of Isleta and Sandia kept the casita cool as we both sat down in front of the fireplace.

“So how do you want to do this?” Def-i asked as I took my zoom recorder out and placed it on the dark-stained-wood coffee table.

“Honestly it would be dope to just listen to some of your music together and then you share whatever you want about the tracks,” I responded.

“Oh, so there’s like no guiding questions or anything?” Def-i asked?

“Nah bro, I just wanna hear your story.”

In the small living room of this casita is where I had the chance to listen to Def-i tell me a story. This is a story about land, family, and colonization. About community and hip hop. With the AC off due to the cooling of the adobe, I pressed record. I first pulled up

“Water is Life”³⁵⁹ on my computer and hit play. The beat echoed against the walls and Def-i began to bob his head along, a mix between a drum machine, futuristic sounding synths, and vinyl scratching on the intro vocals. His hands were clasped as he began to mouth the lyrics. Slowly, as the song went on, the mouthing became more audible until he was quietly rapping along.

“Water is Life”

Def-i

2016

[illegible]

W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-water is life, protect sacred sites

Some are makin' comparisons, others hate on my heritage
say what they say I'm labeled as a Native American
seen other Natives too faded, made an embarrassment
have to tell our own stories and make our own narratives
they look at my face and start behavin' racist and arrogant
statin' our case but we're more than able to bear with it
wash the pain away, it's okay, the rain will take care of it
sacred locations made to embrace and then cherish it
bombin' on these walls, some people callin' it graffiti
throwin' up a hollow then it's followed by a 3D
taggin' up NO DAPL they're not honorin' the treaties
we tried to call Obama but Obama wouldn't see me
followin' the dollar, nothin's offered to the needy
they're watchin' on their TV and their pockets are too greedy
peace to all my people who were brought up in the teepees
average American think that we're all livin' off of freebies

³⁵⁹ The video can be viewed at: https://youtu.be/6YnOt8_k8ps?si=gpoaGzI_XRXWQCoF.

they say history repeats itself and is constantly repeating
they tried to slaughter all of us and thought it would be easy
they're lockin' us up and don't even want us to be breathing
caught up in a gauntlet yet we keep walking through these beatings
stop swallowing their vodka and your body should stop reeking
we've seen hollow broken dreams, no bottles and no genies
too many of my people have fallen from diabetes
we can stop it from succeeding and no we're not retreating
what happens when gas and fossil fuels start leaking
proceeding towards our rivers while our livers start bleeding
I'm rockin' these mocs, while I'm rockin' these mics
we all can unite for what's right, cuz water is life
the last time I checked they were desecrating grave sites
spoke to god and said this is messed up and it ain't right
all people of color we're together in the same fight
we are not infected, we're protected from their snake bite
may weapons of mass expression step into the stage light
they're spreading out bread and credit whenever they lay pipe
how could we ever be trespassin' over our own lands
we have our prayers tied and tied as we hold hands
tired of bein' oppressed by the oppressor
tired of being labeled a protestor not a protector
we're Natives of today, savin' our ways, the hate's fadin' away, as we raise prayers and sage
security snakes makin' a wage by sprayin' mace in your face
government slaves do what it takes to get paid
we can't drink oil, please leave it in the soil
only the royalty are reapin' up the spoils
some leaders are misleadin' us and leavin' us to boil
our hearts keep beatin' while earth's bleeding in turmoil
truthfully I speak in unity with my community
they say break a leg, my homie said how 'bout Wounded Knee

my slow flow is thrown at you, this is NO DAPL
white DAPL security lookin' like cold statues
yet they claim we showed up with shotguns and molotovs
callin' all warriors to drop your tomahawks
yet we brought the piece pipes and Tatanka songs
it's like a lot of cops forgotten all the common laws
this dream like sleep provides clean sight
as we breathe and see light, emcees rewrite history with these mics
we fight, the beast inside the corrupt police who read rights
to put us in dog kennels like felons with three strikes
each night we dream life, gets seen bright, between flights
rhyme schemes and bright beams, divine beings who reach heights
there really is no justice, no peace, just my peace pipe
while the privileged live and think everything seems nice
the earth is not a test tube, respect rain and life
now the frontline is everywhere, protect sacred sites

W-w-w-w-water w-w-w-w-w-water is life
protect-protect-protect-protect sacred-sacred-sacred-sacred-sacred sites
You never really get justice on stolen land-land-land-land-land-land-land

"Okay okay, I haven't listened to these in a minute bro, play the next one," Def-i said as he sat up from where his elbows had just been resting on his knees. I closed the previous tab and pulled up "Don't Drink the Water."³⁶⁰

³⁶⁰ The track can be heard at: <https://def-i.bandcamp.com/track/dont-drink-the-water-feat-ariano>.

"Don't Drink the Water"

Def-i, Ariano

2017

Ariano

Don't do it, somethin' in the fluid
everything they ain't tellin' us is bad enough to do something
don't drink the water, sons and your daughters
you better learn though, if not we gonna burn slow

Def-i

The future's lookin' unclear like our water sources
corporate monsters want their fortunes, they're all remorseless
they didn't plan for sinkholes to break through their toxic storage
but now we're seeing livestock turn into rotten corpses
the bison are polychlorinated, the tap water is fluoridated
it's almost like these mining spills designed to kill are orchestrated
water protectors and like minds, they fight crime and let their light shine
against companies who want their pipelines without a lifeline for a lifetime
askin' me why are you so passionate about water for
only teachin' you what they think you should know, common core
you won't care until all the boxes are gone from the dollar store
before 3030 we'll see birth of the first water wars
stocks and bonds, whatever profits more they're all aboard
dumpin' waste into the ocean sinkin' to the bottom shore
you just wanna turn up, the thought of this leaves you turned off
but I can't forget July 16, 1979 in Church Rock

Ariano

Don't drink the water, our sons and daughters are fallin'
Don't drink the water, our sons and daughters are fallin'

Don't drink the water, don't drink the water

Def-i

This for the residents of Flint, Michigan, the water protectors in North Dakota
oil spills in Oklahoma, Oak Flat Sanders, Arizona
corporate greed will fall eventually, "thankful for the sea that absorbs debris"
let's boycott Nestle tea
water lookin' foggy with an awkward taste
it's filled with concentrates of PCB's and toxic waste
I contemplate the day tectonic plates unlock and break
we all breathe the same air and drink from a common place
children used to swim in the river and play in the field
CEO's are makin' the mils when you're barely payin' your bills
civility snakes that are killin' our lakes with uranium spills
what I'm sayin' is real, they're layin' out filth, arrows rainin', no shields
greedy administrations I'll never trust, I wonder how they'll remember us
thinkin' of all of our people and seven generations ahead of us

Ariano

Don't drink the water, our sons and daughters are fallin'
Don't drink the water, our sons and daughters are fallin'
Don't drink the water, don't drink the water

Livin' in these days where they got us runnin' in a maze scared
but we think it's all good, turnin' up in your hood, yeah
and we say it's all right, as we party until the night disappears
and it's unclear, if we're really alright
don't drink the water, love
don't drink the water, love

Once the beat faded out, Def-i began to speak:

So that "I tried to call Obama, but Obama wouldn't see me." But then the next couple years later, what, we tried to call Donald, but no, he wouldn't see me. Now who's it gonna be? You know what I mean? Okay, damn, so I think going back and listening again, it reminds me of becoming inspired by my love for the land and family first, where I come from, being a Diné person. And where I was raised, my maternal side, is a place called Beautiful Mountain. My grandparents lived and grew up right around there, and Sanostee is like the nearest town [a small town of less than 500 people in the northwest corner of New Mexico]. So as a lot of the hydraulic fracturing sites were starting to pop up a lot more in the San Juan County, I would always see them on my commute from Farmington to Albuquerque, and it started to get closer to Sanostee, and then when I finally started to hear about these sites popping up in even a place really close to where I'm at. I think it's called Desert Rock. So my auntie there is named Eloise Brown. She started this campaign called Dooda Desert Rock, which means "No to Desert Rock," which they were proposing a site to be built there. And my homie [late rapper] Wake Self and I just decided to want to lend our voices to the cause. And so we went out there a few times to perform. And it was definitely like a cause that I think needed a lot of support. But when time came about, like it was so far away that you had to drive maybe an hour off a dirt road that was maybe only ten or fifteen miles away. But the roads were so bad, that it was tough to get supporters there.

So when we got a chance to get up and do our thing, it wasn't that many people there, but there was a prayer site there as well. A lot of people came in. Prayer people, people who were there to protect the land. And this was a couple years before Standing Rock, maybe like three or four years before, and or maybe two, but I just remember that it was such a tough

battle because not only for the lack of physical, like, presence and support, but it was almost like a spiritual battle at the time. And like I took it more seriously when right when Wake and I hit the stage. The first step that we like – after getting there and traveling so far just to come out and try to support and present like our art, in support of people protecting the land. So I knew it felt like a spiritual battle in the moment. I mean, I knew it was a big battle to go against a huge company that's trying to build on Native land and like, but it was a spiritual battle, too. I didn't realize until we actually got out there, and when I took that first step, like Wake and I took a first step on the stage, out of nowhere, this, like, huge gust of wind came about, and it almost blew us off stage, bro, I was, like, literally having to like, try to act like, or try to feel like, I don't know. It was one of the few times in my life that I felt like I could be blown away by the wind alone and, and that's when I was like, wow, the spirits are really out here today. There's not a whole lot of people out here, but the spirits are, and it could be for or against, whatever's happening now.

And there was a lot of prayer going on, like on the bottom of the hill there. So I think that could have been some of the reason why. But, when we got done performing, even though there wasn't anybody there, but it was like, you performing for the elements out here. You're performing for like the area, performing for the land and performing for like the ancestors in the future, then it started to sink into me, like, this is more than battle rap. This is more than, like, what I was being accustomed to at the time.

So it was more than, I guess, than just entertainment. There's like, a feeling of applying hip hop in this kind of way. So from then on, I just really got empowered, in a way, from that experience to create the song called the “Land of Enfrackment.” And New Mexico is, like, it's got a slogan that's called the “Land of Enchantment.” And it really is enchanting out here. But

there's like, a whole 'nother side of the spectrum of that too. So with all these hydraulic fracturing sites that have been increased, it really, like, kind of dampens the mood or vibe, if you travel out somewhere to like Chaco Canyon, or places that everybody knows across the world to come out to, and they see this ancient area inhabited by Natives and like Indigenous People from ancient times, and now it's surrounded by all these hydraulic fracturing zones.

That reminds me, like, yeah, meeting some of the workers out there while we were filming "The Land of Enfrackment," where they were doing the sites. And I remember talking with the workers, and yeah, they were Native, some of them, they look like they were just some of my relatives. And so I couldn't hate them for what they were doing. I asked them, like, so why do you work here? Why do you? And one of their replies was like, they didn't have much other opportunities for jobs. So there's a problem there too, that I guess, that's another issue. So at that point, I guess where do we go from there? And that's kind of like, how I got inspired to want to do art full time too. I don't want to give in to this, like to that system that kills you at the same time pays you just enough for you to get by.

But you know, after that Standing Rock and the NO DAPL movement emerged, and then I wrote the song, "Water is Life." Along with the song, "Don't Drink the Water." There was a night that I couldn't sleep at all, just because, like, after seeing my friends and seeing our allies, seeing just people get maced and getting damaged in all kinds of ways by these hired groups of people that are there to make sure that the pipe gets built or whatever like to stop Natives from, quote "disturbing the peace," or whatever they were trying to say, I don't know...I couldn't be there physically. So how can I help out and at least raise some awareness about this injustice happening against the land and my friends and other Indigenous tribes that were there and gathered to protect the water. So that on top of, like, being involved with

the local movements here, I think just with hip hop, it was like, this is just a no brainer, like for me to try to want to write those songs. And so I wrote, "Water is Life" in just one night, I just started it all out, and I let it all out, and as much as I could, because I was, like, I just couldn't take it anymore. And I know that the song, you know, I just put so much intention behind the song that I wanted it to help in some way, and I think it kind of did.

But it was really good to be there performing at the Standing Rock Camp too. And I think that's when I realized that this song was kind of a little bit more of like, it helped me. I don't know, I can't describe it in words, but when I performed the song at the Standing Rock Camp, to me, it was just as powerful as performing it at the Water is Life Fundraiser that happened. But maybe it was even more powerful. It was just so cold that day, but I just remember that I felt like – I don't know, I kind of strained away from like, how it got started and stuff, but that's a little bit about how the songs got, or maybe kind of how I got into activism, or whatever people call it, you know, with music. And we fundraised a lot of money for the Legal Defense Fund that day [over \$1.8 million]. So that was a good outcome and the song got put out quite a bit. So thankful that Sway put it out. And there's a few people out there who really care about issues and lyricism and can actually dive into the songs enough to want to share it and help out. So I think it was a really good experience, though, to be part of.

But I think it's probably what made me stray away from battle rap, bro... Oh just wanted to add for "Don't Drink the Water." Yeah, that was sort of the same issue, but like, different location, I guess. A couple lines of the first verse, I mean, are kind of referencing like Church Rock and a lot of the abandoned uranium sites there. So that's kind of like, another issue that we kind of deal with here on our rez, and a lot of people been infected by the uranium mines. My family too, even my grandfather was a miller, so he was always around

and had direct contact with it and it infected him. It caused a lot of illness to my family too. So the song, "Don't Drink the Water," I'm alluding to that.

Hip Hop as Rupture: Atomic Memory and Healing the Land

Throughout this dissertation, stories and storytelling practices inform my analysis and live as entities in the form of kinship. Stories hold knowledge and guide others on their journeys, passing bundles of knowledge. Stories can also start to heal the intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and extractive industries. Deploying a Native hip hop ecological practice, I argue that Native hip hop can aid in healing from atomic trauma and in healing the land itself. Full or “true” healing is something that I think Def-i believes in, and I want to believe this too, but colonization runs deep. There is, however, a global sweep of activities that Native hip hop is a part of. Being woven into the fabric of a larger tapestry reflects serving as a part of a longer trajectory that might one day fully break free from colonization. Hip hop, in all its forms—the pillars, on-the-ground, digital, rural, urban—is absolutely at the forefront of building futures through the passing of Native hip hop bundles.

Def-i’s tracks sound the history of the Diné land being injected with toxic waste. Speaking of the history of New Mexico, Chicanx scholar and Nuevomexicana Myrriah Gómez argues that, “[i]f Spanish colonialism brought Spanish colonizers, and U.S. colonialism brought American colonizers, then nuclear colonialism brought nuclear colonizers—scientists, military personnel, atomic bomb testing, and nuclear waste among

them.”³⁶¹ Similarly, in her monograph *Land of Nuclear Enchantment*, American studies scholar Lucie Genay explains that

New Mexico’s fate within this complex was sealed on November 16, 1942. As it had been decided that the development, final processing, assembly, and testing of the bomb would be conducted in one place, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the so-called Project Y, suggested to his military counterpart, General Leslie Groves, that the world’s first secret atomic laboratory be established on the location of the secluded Los Alamos Ranch School (LARS) on a mesa in the northern part of the state... In the decades following the creation of site Y, the budding scientific community in the Jémez Mountains did not just grow to become the Los Alamos National Laboratories (LANL) and a ten-thousand-inhabitant town, it also spread, affecting the surrounding region.³⁶²

As the LANL grew, they needed labor beyond the settlers who moved to site Y in New Mexico for the Manhattan Project. Genay also traces the early uranium mining labor, especially just outside of Shiprock, where Def-i grew up. She contends that

George Tutt, who started working in the mines in 1949 at age fifteen as a “hand mucker,” shoveled uranium waste and ore by hand without mask or gloves for \$2.50 per hour in 1960. He began experiencing respiratory difficulties a few years later. Because the Bureau of Indian Affairs prohibited unions on the reservation, Navajo miners earned \$0.75 per hour less than union uranium miners in 1963 and the difference was more than \$1.00 in 1968.³⁶³

Without the ability to unionize and have fair representation, Diné workers could not fight the conditions which they were placed in. Genay continues documenting that

³⁶¹ Gómez, Myrriah. *Nuclear Nuevo México: Colonialism and the Effects of the Nuclear Industrial Complex on Nuevomexicanos*. The University of Arizona Press, 2022, p. 5.

³⁶² Genay, Lucie. *Land of Nuclear Enchantment: A New Mexican History of the Nuclear Weapons Industry*. University of New Mexico Press, 2019, p. 2.

³⁶³ Ibid, pp. 187–188

Tommy James, miner in the 1950s in Shiprock, describes how the smoke could give headaches and nosebleeds. He depicts his job as “slave work” and underscores the differences between Navajo workers, who had to build their own tents and for whom the companies “never prepared anything,” and Anglo surveyors, mechanics, and office workers, who had cabins and showers. He also describes how waste was spilled out of the mill and flowed into the river. Joe Ray Harvey, who started working for Kerr McGee in 1961, complained about the lack of ventilation. Spouses and children were exposed as well because they washed the clothes and sometimes lived onsite in the tents. The children played in the radioactive dust and drank contaminated water. Minnie Tsosie, widow of a Navajo miner, reveals that both her daughters had to have their uteruses removed.³⁶⁴

Similarly, Gómez posits that

Despite what many people argue, New Mexico is not a national sacrifice zone. In order to be a sacrifice zone, the object being sacrificed has to hold value. New Mexico does not hold value to the nation other than being a wasteland.³⁶⁵

The “sacrifice” which settlers speak of is in fact environmental racism and erases both the Natives and Nueomexicanas/os through the guise of empty land for nuclear colonialism. Those who tell the story of the People, however, are providing a rupture to this narrative. Def-i spoke about how he’s been directly impacted by this history in Shiprock, and how the mines have caused so much sickness and pain in his family. Both “Water Is Life” and “Don’t Drink the Water” are land-based stories about his ancestors’ fight for survival against LANL.

Through Def-i’s story and his music, he explains that the fight for water and land is ultimately “what made [him] stray away from battle rap.”³⁶⁶ In that moment “it was more

³⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 188

³⁶⁵ Gómez 2022, p. 10

³⁶⁶ Conversation with Def-i on August 14, 2024.

than...just entertainment” and he was empowered by “applying hip hop in this kind of way.”³⁶⁷ The land informs the hip hop and the hip hop informs the land. It is this reciprocal relationship between all humans and non-humans that provides the groundwork for renewing relatives through hip hop as kin. In “Water Is Life,” Def-i raps

what happens when gas and fossil fuels start leaking
proceeding towards our rivers while our livers start bleeding
I’m rockin’ these mocs, while I’m rockin’ these mics
we all can unite for what’s right, cuz water is life.

The response to fossil fuels leaking and their medical impact is both “rockin’ these mocs” and “rockin’ these mics.” Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon describes Indigenous futurism as bringing the past forward, and simultaneously rockin’ mocs and mics reworlds settler geographies despite the continued nuclear apocalypse and the land’s atomic memory.³⁶⁸

Def-i is always creating cyphers, whether it is at the Olympics in Paris, at a grammar school on the Diné reservation, or in this music video. In “Water Is Life,” as shown above, the ground has cardboard which the dancers—Saquoia Juarez and Xavier Bolton—are mixing traditional dance with breaking, their mocs in conversation with Def-i’s mic. As I cited in chapter two, Recollet contends that “Indigenous motion is in the creases—activated through sampling, repetition, and looping—bringing what is traditional into futurity.”³⁶⁹ Motion is not only in dancing, but it is also present sonically. Scratched by Diné DJ Reflekshin (Lawrence Martinez Jr.), “Water Is Life” draws on the early breakbeats of hip hop. DJ Reflekshin, known for his live DJ sets that merge breakbeats from multiple records,

³⁶⁷ Ibid

³⁶⁸ Dillon 2012

³⁶⁹ Recollet, Karyn. “Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix.” *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2016, pp. 91–105, p. 94.

carries that practice over to this track. Two distinct sections go back and forth between each other—one that has a synth part playing constant eighth notes that sounds like a mix between a Rhodes and an 80s synth lead, and the other that has an organ and piano. With a constant boom-bap drumbeat—that early hip hop bass drum and snare sound—the difference between sections sounds as if DJ Reflekshin is using two 45s and switching between them. “Activated through sampling, repetition, and looping,” the practice of building Native futures through Native hip hop ecologies lies “in the creases.” By reworlding and remapping the forced containments of settler geographies, Native hip hop weaves together histories and futures in every bundle. The creases between mocs and mics, sonic sections within the track, tradition and futurity, and settler histories and Native histories serve as a rupture between these dichotomies. As practices that inform and are informed by the land, Native hip hop ecologies renew relations in the face of uninhabitability. Even on a small scale, Native hip hop can help heal the land.

Def-i also speaks about Church Rock, NM in “Don’t Drink the Water,” connecting this history to the Dakota Access Pipeline and to Flint, MI. He raps,

I can’t forget July 16, 1979 in Church Rock...

water lookin’ foggy with an awkward taste

it’s filled with concentrates of PCB’s and toxic waste...

CEO’s are makin’ the mils when you’re barely payin’ your bills

civility snakes that are killin’ our lakes with uranium spills.

Genay further describes that

An earthen dam collapsed at the United Nuclear Corporation Church Rock uranium mill, releasing one thousand tons of radioactive mill tailing and 93 million gallons of acidic and radioactive wastewater into a creek that flowed into the Rio Puerco. The waste flowed

downstream for at least eighty miles, past the homes of some 1,700 Navajo people. This was the largest radioactive accident in the nation's history according to the US Geological Survey, but most Americans never heard about it because it affected people with little political agency.³⁷⁰

And even then, "clean-up operations took place in 1980 and 1981: 3,500 barrels of waste material were retrieved but this is estimated at only 1 percent of the waste."³⁷¹ While Diné People were being poisoned for months, settlers ignored the spill in its entirety because of the lack of their political agency.

While in operation, these sites created jobs and dependency on the very toxin that was killing Natives. Now that many of the sites are abandoned and closed, waste removal still is not a priority. For example, "near Shiprock, a retired Navajo miner lost two grandchildren to birth defects before learning that his house was built on radioactive waste."³⁷² Many cleanup projects only began very recently. In Shiprock, despite "covering the two piles [of mill tailings] with about seven feet of impermeable soil and three feet of rock" between 1985 and 1986, the "groundwater around the tailings remained contaminated."³⁷³ Almost thirty years later, a more comprehensive cleanup finally began in August of 2012.³⁷⁴

These mines have had long lasting impacts on the Diné People decades after the initial Manhattan Project began. As of 2014, there were over 521 abandoned uranium mines just on Diné land alone, and 523 as of 2025. The harm that they cause Native communities is not just from these mines, but also from nuclear tests that were performed.

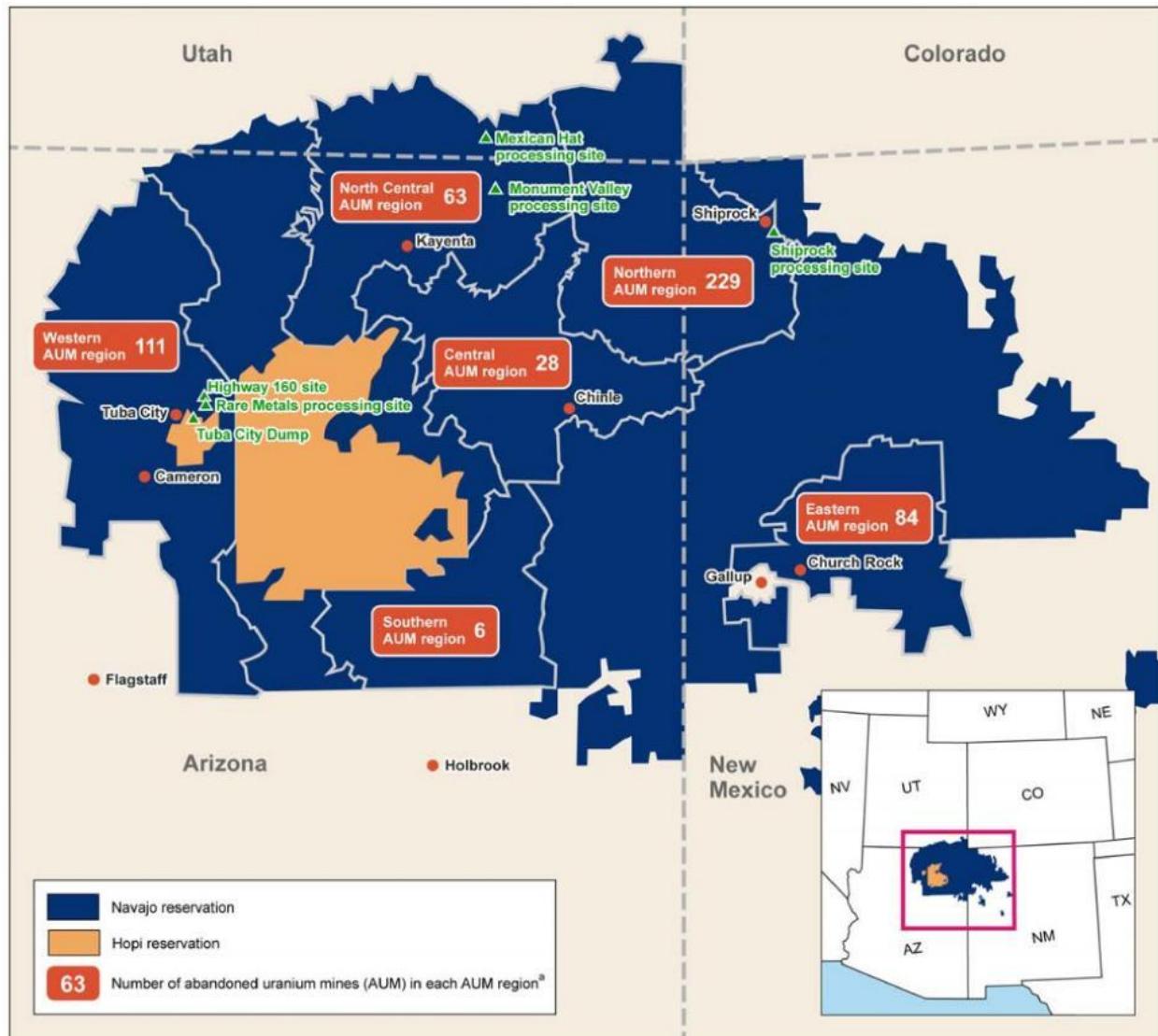
³⁷⁰ Genay 2019, p. 179

³⁷¹ Ibid, p. 180

³⁷² Ibid, p. 179

³⁷³ Ibid, p. 221

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 221



Sources: GAO analysis of EPA and DOE data; Map Resources (map).

Figure 24: Image of the 521 abandoned uranium mines across Diné and Hopi land. GAO. "Map of the Navajo and Hopi Reservations with 521 Abandoned Uranium Mines," In GAO. "Uranium Contamination: Overall Scope, Time Frame, and Cost Information Is Needed for Contamination Cleanup on the Navajo Reservation." United States Accountability Office Report to Congressional Requesters, 2014, p. 7.

Genay writes that

A Pueblo member, Darryl Martínez, explains how the community now has its own environmental program to monitor the water. Their prime concern, however, is the Labs'

expansion. Darryl wonders whether they would have to settle elsewhere like his ancestors had been forced to do when the weather irreversibly changed or once the fields were overgrazed. He believes LANL could be a new reason for departure, especially considering that a worrying number of people in the community have died of cancer.³⁷⁵

While the comparison is apt, overgrazed fields are regenerative. Poisoned land is not. While Martínez might envision migration calling upon a time when many Native Nations cared for the land through reciprocity, many Natives of the Southwest call the land their home and are constrained due to capitalism and settler infrastructure.

Def-i shared how he saw many Natives working the mining plants, trapped as economic hostages. Often forced into isolation by the reservation system, onto what McKittrick has theorized as the uninhabitable, settlers target these areas for their own capital gain while under the guise of bringing jobs to the community. Empathy, of course, is required in breaking intergenerational land-based trauma. Def-i says how he “couldn’t hate them for what they were doing.” Like so many others, they were caught up in the “capitalist enterprises” due to nuclear colonialism.

Hip hop, however, continues to empower the next generation to break cycles and build reservation futures. Def-i saw his grandfather get sick because of these toxic industries, and he said how it caused much illness throughout his family. Cherokee Nation scholar Clint Carroll contends that “tribal initiatives to reclaim stolen lands are not solely political projects of regaining sovereign space, but means for healing intergenerational trauma that was caused by forced severance from the land.”³⁷⁶ Oil companies and the long history of atomic toxic waste have not only served in the severing of the land from Natives,

³⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 185

³⁷⁶ Carroll, Clint. “Native Enclosures: Tribal National Parks and the Progressive Politics of Environmental Stewardship in Indian Country.” *Geoforum*, vol. 53, 2014, pp. 31–40, p. 38.

but have also actively brought Natives into their colonial projects. Death and sickness have spread through communities impacted by spills and the release of toxic waste. Land Back and land stewardship are not just political projects, as Carroll argues, but projects of building Native futures.

Tsimshian (Kitsumkalum/Kitselas) and Nuuchah-nulth (Ahousaht) Indigenous governance scholar Clifford Atleo and Haudenosaunee (Cayuga) environmental management scholar Jonathan Boron discuss land in the context of Indigenous environmental justice law. They argue that within the settler legal system

Indigenous peoples are experiencing two specific challenges related to: (1) making Indigenous conceptions of land relations legible within settler-colonial individualised property regimes, and; (2) translating these settler-colonial theories and practices of property ownership into our worldviews.³⁷⁷

Here, I also build on musicologist Mark Katz's work on hip hop diplomacy, tracing how the U.S. government has sent goodwill ambassadors (which Def-i was a part of) around the world to teach and connect through hip hop.³⁷⁸ In the face of legislators and politicians who aid in eco-terrorism, Native hip hop is the rupture needed to break federal policy. There can be no diplomacy with settlers who do everything in their power to uphold the structures in place. As bundles are passed through the ecologies of Indigeneity, coalitions and community are built and organized towards the goal of Land Back. Native hip hop ecological diplomacy requires breaking free from settler infrastructure and engaging policymakers through relationality, spatiality, and temporality.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Atleo, Clifford, and Jonathan Boron. "Land Is Life: Indigenous Relationships to Territory and Navigating Settler Colonial Property Regimes in Canada" *Land*, vol. 11, no. 5, 2022, pp. 609–621, p. 617.

³⁷⁸ Katz, Mark. *Build: The Power of Hip-hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

³⁷⁹ Wilson, Nicole, et al. "Climate–water Crises: Critically Engaging Relational, Spatial, and Temporal Dimensions." *Ecology and Society*, vol. 29, no. 4:13, 2024, pp. 1–12.

Through Def-i's music, hip hop is an extension of the land and the lived histories of those on the land, including his family. Whether it is spreading information, obtaining signatures for petitions, sharing harm that is actively being placed upon communities, or being a soundtrack for events, Native hip hop ecologies can reimagine settler conceptions of property and help rebuild a land-based regenerative model of relationality that equally breaks intergenerational trauma and heals the land for future generations. While of course no single thing can fully return life and land to Natives, hip hop ecologies also contain an alternative abolitionist sonic model that centers relations, community, coalition-building, and connectivity. Hip hop, across its many iterations, brings people together and grows networks. These ecologies—while perhaps formed through hip hop or at events that integrated hip hop—grow in various ways that attend to a multitude of issues facing Native communities.

'Eyoomkuuka'ro Kokomaar: Ancestral Canoe Making and Ecologies of Indigeneity

On June 15, 2024, Tongva and Acjachemem community member L. Frank Manríquez held an ancestral canoe-making gathering at the Aquatic Cove in San Francisco. At this gathering, the group Audiopharmacy performed. Manríquez also made a website for the event and posted two different canoe-making booklets, one in the Atáaxum language of the Tongva Peoples and another in the Šmuwič language of the Chumash People. Musqueam First Nation scholar Corina Sparrow and Saulteaux First Nation scholar Shelly Johnson (Mukwa Musayett) argue that in their own context, “few Musqueam Elders retain thorough knowledge of Musqueam's canoeing and carving traditions, which makes this canoe

cultural revival project critically important.”³⁸⁰ The same is true for Manríquez. Research and learning about ancestral knowledge are critical to cultural preservation. The canoe booklets in Atáaxum and Šmuwič are bundles that pass knowledge in ways that the English language and the process of translation cannot. Ancestral knowledge in English often loses ways of being and knowing. This event was not just canoe-making, although that was the focus. It also provided and passed knowledge of food, language, medicine, and, of course, music.

As a part of this event, Audiopharmacy provided a soundtrack as the community built canoes. Black and Pomo Nation musician and Audiopharmacy member Ras K’Dee has been part of the canoe-making workshops for years. Having grown up in Northern California, he has always been connected to his community. In a conversation with Ras, he explained his relationship to canoe-making.

So I went to those workshops initially, and you know, I was a part of helping with the dugout [style of canoes]. Then they did a bunch of workshops there and a lot of them were where we didn’t know what these canoes were gonna be. But we built, like, a bunch of models. Like smaller, smaller versions. I think there was like six or seven of those little ones that we made and then we worked on the big one. You know, and it’s not like a day long thing. Like it’s several days that you’re working on these things, and even then it’s like, there’s still more work to do, you know. Imagine you got like, you know, twenty people in the yard, in the canoe yard, and like, everyone’s working. You have to burn the inside so that process was like the digging out process. And then, like, burning the inside out. And we did that traditionally. Back in the day they would, like

³⁸⁰ Shelly Johnson, Mukwa Musayett and Corrina Sparrow. "Pulling Together in an Indigenous Cultural Revitalization Canoe: Indigenous Women's Water and Land-based Research Methodologies in Action." *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2019, pp. 9–36, p. 12.

build a long fire, and then they would, you know, scoop the ashes in on top and then have someone maintaining the fire. You constantly have, like, ashes being scooped into it and then it catches the inside on fire. Then you go ahead and scoop. And then do it all over. It's like all day, you know, I mean like all day for a couple weeks, you know? And that's just like hollowing it out. And so for some we ended up speeding up that process, so they had a torch and like, they were just like blow torching the top and then and then adding it and then blow torching it and adding it. So we learned that process, the carving process. There were also workshops for like, the paddle making... And then I think it was the fifth canoe that was the tule [long grass-like leaves that grow in bodies of shallow water in Northern California] canoe. And the tule canoe was, you know, revitalizing kind of tule harvesting and making different things like weaving, making bags or making, you know, the tule canoe. And so I was a part of that as well, you know. Well, they've gone out several years and harvested too and that was led by an elder from around here. His name is Ed. He goes by Redbird. Ed, Ed Willie. But he's actually like right down the street from me. Like maybe ten miles away. But they have a farm called Heron Shadow. It's one of the culture conservancies farms. But they do, like, cultural work. Cultural preservation work. So they have that farm and so he was basically the leader of those workshops and he's built a bunch of tule canoes. And he's, you know, he's a basket maker as well. He's pretty, like, well versed I would say in ecology in the area... So yeah those are some of the canoes. And some of the canoes that day at the gathering. I guess I got invited because, you know, like I'm connected to that community. Working on all of those canoes, you know, I think just connected me in a different way to the community.³⁸¹

³⁸¹ Conversation with Ras K'Dee on January 8, 2025.

Ras, like all of the rappers in this dissertation, is a member of his Nation first. As I watched him speak, his love for knowledge and for ancestral ecological practices was evident. He embodies these ways of knowing, and they inform everything he does, including his music-making.

Hip hop is equally a soundtrack for events such as these as it is a music that sounds relations. Rooted in Squamish tradition, Squamish elder Larry (Shucks) Nahanee shares that

The canoe connects the land and the ocean. It connects the past and the future of clans and communities through travel, trade, marriages, and other ceremonies. The shape of the canoe reflects the nature of the waters and the culture of the people.³⁸²

Hip hop too sounds these worldviews and all its relations. It connects past and future generations through oral tradition and can also serve as another voice for the land. Nahanee also argues that the canoe itself is a form of pedagogy. The canoe does not just represent one aspect of cultural preservation; it also teaches the community about the ecological fabric involved in its construction. Similarly, Ras brought Audiopharmacy to this event not to promote his music. He did not write any songs that specifically spoke of canoes. Rather, all of that knowledge is embedded in his music because he is part of the community. The canoe, much like Native hip hop more broadly, contains land-based knowledge that shares bundles of ecological histories.

The Pomo Nation, located just a few hours north of the Bay Area, has ancestral roots in “Be-lo-kai, meaning verdant valley” (what today is called Potter Valley, CA).³⁸³ The Pomo Nation website describes that “[t]here were three main villages, called Pomo, Sedam (or Tse

³⁸² Nahanee, Larry (Shucks), et al. “Canoe as Teacher.” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2021, pp. 54–74, p. 57.

³⁸³ Retrieved from the Pomo Nation website at: <https://pinoleville-nsn.gov/heritage/our-history/>.

tum) and Canel (or Shanel, Sanel), and several smaller villages and camps.”³⁸⁴ Ras is deeply interested in ecologies of Indigeneity. He cares about how different Nations are connected to serve their communities and the land. He is invested in bringing cultural organizations together to envision a future for the land and the Peoples on it. While of course ecology describes the land itself, living with relations also requires a network of relationships that serve one another through mutual aid. Ecologies of Indigeneity encompass all the ways in which Natives are working together—and more/other-than-human relatives—to build futures. Getting Land Back allows for both cultivating and renewing knowledge that is disappearing, such as canoe practices, as well as Native land stewardship that provides space for ecologies to thrive. While Ras is a rapper and musician, he is part of this broader network of relationships built on community. Native hip hop thrives because his people are learning ancient ways, such as tule basketry and canoe weaving, and, in return, Native hip hop carries these seeds.

On January 8, 2025, I clocked out of my graduate assistant shift and headed to the basement of UChicago’s Center for Identity + Inclusion to one of the grad-worker offices. There were boxes stacked to the ceiling of Maruchan ramen, instant soups, and canned goods for our low-income first-generation students. I moved a few out of the way to carve some space on the table for my computer. I pulled up Zoom, and soon Ras’ smile filled my screen. “Good to see you, brother,” he said.

As our conversation continued, he told me a story about taking Land Back and building community through the ecologies of Indigeneity:

I live here on my homelands. I moved back here in 2017. And you know, I think it’s

³⁸⁴ Ibid

always been a goal of mine, like, coming here, coming back home, cuz I was living in the Bay Area for, like, 20 years. So in 2011 my grandmother passed away. She was my Black side and she, you know, she had migrated from Texas in the 1930s. So during that time, you know, her and my grandfather helped desegregate the first school in Texas. And so, like, and they caught heat for that and they kind of had to flee Texas. And so they came out West and stayed with my great uncle, Uncle John who had established himself in the Bay Area. And so they were able to buy a home. You know, back then it was like \$15,000 in San Francisco to buy a house. When my grandma passed away, well just before she passed, she sold the home. And so we all inherited, you know, like \$150,000 each and that was a blessing to be able to purchase this land.

Over the course from 2012 when we purchased the land until 2017, I was just kind of like, I was kind of watching the land. We did some workshops. We hosted a blessing of the land. Put in some garden beds and planted trees and built like, a little shed. So I could stay when I would come here. It was like a lot of work to get, you know, to get it to this point. So those first years were just watching the land like, you know, watching where the water drains, where the water builds up. Where the salamanders are at, Where the moisture areas are at. That gave us kind of like the idea of, like, you know, where the sun hits, where does the sun come up? You know, how often is it hot? What time of year does the sun go behind the ridge? This helped us to really determine where to build this building where I'm sitting in now... Then we started building like a community building. Now we also have like artists in residence staying here. And eventually we wanna build a music studio. And the original intention of this building is to be a visual art studio. And so, you know, have painters and visual artists upstairs and downstairs. And then within the year, we want to do more, like, community halls and healing

workshops or like cuz that it's pretty big.

But yeah, you know, I guess I kind of got into, you know, stewarding land and working with land. You know, the land has given me and my ancestors so much and my homelands here have, like, opened up the doors to all these opportunities, all these things that I didn't see when I was living in the Bay. And there's also, like, this grassroots movement returning back to the land. Like I mentioned, we have Heron Shadow Farm which is a Native lead farm. And another farm which is just a little bit further down the road which is a Black Indigenous lead farm. And another, Shelter Wood, which is a queer people of color lead space. I'm also working with Movement Generation, an organization that just got land back from Sogorea Te'.³⁸⁵ And I think their contract is like 45 years. And then we work with the Center for Equitable Land Exchange, and also SELC, Sustainable Economies Law Center. But, you know, it's kind of a movement. We had a convening of land stewards from all around. You know, Santa Cruz, Watsonville area, from this area, from the Bay Area. From further up north, like all around California but mostly Northern California. And we sat and did a three day envisioning of what we want for the next 100 years for our land projects, and that was a really powerful gathering to like, think about in that mindset to think about, you know, what we wanna plan for our future. The seeds that we wanna plant.

These are the ways that we wanna be connected. And what we've noticed from that gathering is that a lot of those connections that we talked about making are happening naturally because we're, like, all in tune with what we're doing together. So that was a really powerful tool and also a powerful envisioning of like, you know, our future for the next 100

³⁸⁵ An urban Native women-led land trust based in the San Francisco Bay Area that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous people through rematriation. Retrieved from: <https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/>.

years and what we want. What we want to bring about for our people, and for the youth, and for and for the next generation. And we kind of did that also with our latest magazine cuz we also have a Native art and culture magazine. So our last issue, "The Future's Indigenous," we kind of did that for Sonoma County. So we had a 30 year envisioning of what we want to see in this county in our area.

And of course, you know we can't fix everything. You know, there's like 600 wineries, and they're polluting everywhere. You know the deforestation that happened. The forest has been cut like three times, three or four times, you know, in this area. And the deforestation, the ecocide that happened because of that, we're not gonna be able to fix in one generation and maybe it might take ten generations, you know? And so there's still a lot to do in our area around that, but the envisioning process was about like, okay, like, what do we want? What do we want to see, you know? And so we talked about like, you know, finishing our space here and it being like this model of sustainability and education. But then we also talked about, you know, the "Nest 2.0" like growing our space and like what does that look like. In our case we want a university. Like Indigenous Arts University. And you know, focus around the languages in this area. So like the first thing is bringing back the language, and then the arts can flourish through that process. And all the other things like the plants, the ecological knowledge. And so that's kind of our vision for this area.

And then one of the other big things was we want to build a bike trail from the town Santa Rosa into the ocean, and then it'll go along the ocean and back into Bodega and then back into Sebastopol here. So it's like a big trail connecting to the ocean and then having, you know, farm stands along the way and wildlife crossings and a corridor... People can stop at the different farms and buy their stuff, you know. So just kind of like envisioning the things that we

want to see and, you know. I feel like those magazines are reaching our county leaders cuz, you know, I just saw that they proposed a wildlife crossing, this year, you know, in our area... We don't have to do it all, but we can, like, plant seeds and then those things will happen. Will come to fruition.

Hip Hop as Land Stewardship

Ras embodies ecologies of Indigeneity. Buying the land himself, stewarding it for the community, and creating spaces for gathering—and one day education once his Native Arts University is built—all represent relational living. Potawatomi botanist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “[i]n the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources.”³⁸⁶ She continues that “to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us.”³⁸⁷ In an essay by Eve Tuck, Allison Guess, and Hannah Sultan, they contend that by looking to Black dislocation and gentrification, it is clear that “white settlers have no problem giving Indigenous [undesirable] land to Black people, until they want it back [when it becomes desirable].”³⁸⁸ Ras, as an Afro-Native person, used the settler infrastructure established to address both of these sites of dislocation. While this is not possible for everyone, he is expanding ancestral land ownership through Black/Native solidarity. In conjunction with the Sogorea Te’ and other land trust organizations trying to get land back, Ras is building networks that all pursue the same goal.

³⁸⁶ Kimmerer 2013, p. 17

³⁸⁷ Ibid

³⁸⁸ Tuck, Eve, and Allison Guess and Hannah Sultan. “Not Nowhere: Collaborating on Selfsame Land.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/26/not-nowhere-collaborating-on-selfsame-land/>.

My conversation with Ras was also just days after the initial fires in the Los Angeles area in early January 2025. We asked each other how our friends and family in the area were doing. Ras was already providing assistance and housing to those in need. We also began discussing the banning of Native fires within the context of ancestral land stewardship. Controlled fires fertilized the soil, supporting the area's biodiversity and sustaining healthy ecological practices.³⁸⁹ Instead, after hundreds of years of making fires illegal, the land is hurting. Lyla June Johnston argues that “[s]cientists interpret that around 3,000 years ago ancestors of the Shawnee began to curate a biodiverse food forest and managed it with routine burning of the forest floor, a common management practice of Indigenous Peoples throughout the Americas.”³⁹⁰ Apart from preventing overcrowding forests, burning also opened space for travel. She continues that these open spaces attract “herbivores such as deer, antelope, bison, elk, etc., who feast on the grasslands that spring up in the wake of fire and ash and correspondent soil vitality.”³⁹¹

Through all the work that Ras, he hopes to continue building the movement, connecting with more Native organizers and collaborating with them to heal the land. These ecologies of Indigeneity, both scientifically and socially, are critical to building Native futures. Since settlers arrived, the land has been seen as a commodity, and settlers do not view our non-human relations as kin. Johnston describes that

In many Indigenous languages, food is not an object, nor is it a noun. It is either a verb or derived from a verb. Perhaps our words for food are verb-based because food is not seen as

³⁸⁹ A short video on this by Native scholar Lyla June Johnston can be watched at: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEmTb2WxHf-/?igsh=dDBremt5dXBvMjY1>.

³⁹⁰ Johnston, Lyla June. “Native American Regenerative Food and Land Management Systems.” In D’Silva, Joyce and McKenna, Carol eds. *Regenerative Farming and Sustainable Diets*. Routledge, 2024, pp. 270–275, p. 271.

³⁹¹ Ibid, p. 272

a static instant, but an ever-moving exchange of life and love.³⁹²

In a very literal sense, the Earth will soon not be habitable unless settlers begin to honor Native land stewardship.

In 2022, Audiopharmacy released a track called “Treatment,” which features Deserae Harp. As a closing to this section and this chapter, “Treatment” sums up the first three chapters. This track not only talks about colonization, but forced education, ecological warfare, and the power of solidarity to create futures by always having a voice through hip hop. Over haunting flutes and the sparsity of only a bass drum, Desirae Harp tells a story.

In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and told the tale of a new world that wasn’t being used. He paved the way for settlers and missionaries to come, who viewed us as invisible beings that they could build their colonies and churches on top of. They killed us, with guns, germs, and steel, and cut off our food supply by slaughtering animals and scorching fields. Our bodies were sexually abused, worked like pawns, and used as pawns in their military feuds. They wouldn’t have survived without our knowledge of how to live off this land. And their bill of rights? Wouldn’t exist without the Iroquois Confederacy’s constitution. Still they called us savages and put a price on our heads, following Manifest Destiny, as they moved west. They forced us to move from our traditional lands, marching us thousands of miles as we carried the dead in our hands. They herded us like cattle onto reservations, then beat our language out of us to give us an English education. They taught our Tribal leaders to look like them to improve government to government relations. This only made it easier for our Tribal leaders to be paid off, so the corporations could push their agenda on our legislation. They shoved us on land no one wanted until they discovered the natural resources under our feet, and now they’re trying to build oil pipelines through the water that we drink? Our People continue to be colonized across this Earth, but we will not give up. The voices of our

³⁹² Ibid, p. 270

ancestors will be heard.³⁹³

Native hip hop as kin forces us to confront the ecologies that surround us in critical ways, forefronting relationality and building towards radical futures. Native hip hop is the rupture that is needed.

Conclusion: Land Back (Please)

In Two-Spirit Wari poet and rapper Bobby Sanchez's song "Quechua 101 Land Back Please," she raps

land back, land back, land back, please

stolen land under siege.³⁹⁴

Through its many forms from sounding the land to demanding Land Back, Native hip hop ecologies pass hip hop bundles that in turn build Native futures free from extractive industries. As a hip hop practice that is an extension of the land and these continued histories, Native hip hop ecologies allow for radical abolitionist sonic reimaginations of Native ways of life and the renewing of knowledge that can provide a regenerative model for future generations to come.

As Native hip hop bundles require a slow unwrapping and unraveling of their content, they protect those to whom they are gifted while simultaneously acting as a poison to settler geographical containments. By reworlding and remapping, Native hip hop serves as a rupture, weaving together histories and futures in every bundle. As I have argued, the land informs the hip hop, and the hip hop informs the land. Hip hop not only makes kin but

³⁹³ Audiopharmacy - Topic. "Treatment." *YouTube*. August 25, 2022.

https://youtu.be/VcRT_P-O6p4?si=iaFGqyFTUcHDyv7q.

³⁹⁴ Bobby Sanchez. "Quechua 101 Land Back Please." *YouTube*. March 20, 2021.

https://youtu.be/XT-Dm7LQpfg?si=NHp_On2v6SkaqQ4l.

is kin, and through relationality, it is a practice of land stewardship. Hip hop, as a steward of the land, contains ecologies that represent an alternative sonic model that centers relations, community, coalition-building, and connectivity.

In a conversation I had with Bobby Sanchez, she said how

We have a responsibility to speak up, like, for the water, for the land, right? Because that's who we are. Like, we're water protectors, right? Land protectors. So like, I think, you know, making music is cool when it's about love, when it's about romance, when it's about yourself. But like, I think when you bring up the bigger picture, like, of what's going on right now, whether whatever Nation you're in most likely is facing, like, colonization from some type of perspective, right? So, like, that's why I always talk about Land Back. That's why we was trying to speak up for the water being polluted and the land being stolen.³⁹⁵

While the tracks themselves pass on land-based bundles, many Nations and communities are fighting similar battles globally. These rappers are constantly growing their own ecologies and are collaborating on tracks or shows. As I stated earlier, Bobby Sanchez and Mare Advertencia Lirika were both part of a Toronto “Native Women in the Arts” show called “Kwe Performance Series: Voices,” on Saturday, March 22, 2025. Then on April 24, 2025, Bobby flew out to be part of Def-i’s annual “Gathering of MCs” event in Albuquerque, NM. On October 11, 2025, Bobby and Lirika were both on the same lineup again, this time for the International Indigenous Hip Hop Fest in NYC.

All the rappers presented in this chapter continue to fight for the land by any means necessary, using hip hop as a way to come to consciousness with the land through Native feminist land ethics. The elements have been present throughout this chapter. The water,

³⁹⁵ From a conversation with Bobby Sanchez on August 14, 2025.

the fire, the air, and the land guide these artists in their own ecological practices and in how they make music. By sharing land-based hip hop bundles, Native hip hop ecologies cross borders to address transnational extractive industries. From Peru (Bobby) to México (Mare, Janeidy, and Zara) to the U.S. (Def-i and Ras) to Canada (Eekwol and JB the First Lady), Native hip hop carries seeds that pass on ancestral knowledge. Through the ecologies of Indigeneity, these artists can build coalitions and expand community in order to renew relations and build Native futures.

Chapter 4

Sound Back: Native Sonic Futures and the Hip Hop Archive

After not having an official home, the Center for Native Futures officially found a permanent location in downtown Chicago, IL in the midst of June 2023. While they hosted several artist talks that summer such as Ojibwe painter Le'Ana Asher and Osage, Kaw, and Cheyenne River Lakota Sioux artist Chris Pappan, their grand opening event was for an eight-month exhibit titled "Native Futures." Displaying the art from a number of Native artists across Turtle Island, the opening night included a performance from Sicangu Lakota rapper Frank Waln.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, hip hop is woven into the fabric of Native life. Black and Saginaw Chippewa historian Kyle T. Mays asserts that,

Hip hop artists do not confine themselves to the limits of today; they try and define how they want to be, and also imagine new futures for the entire Native community...Hip hop is a way forward, to help us create Indigenous futures, by any means necessary. Indigenous hip hop has the potential to be on the forefront of radical imaginings and help with decolonization efforts across Turtle Island—and beyond.³⁹⁶

The "forefront of radical imaginings" can be many things. It can be combating an entire colonial system and instituting hip hop pedagogy while rematriating the passing of knowledge through the ecologies of Indigeneity, but it can also be as simple as survivance. Just that act alone is still building futures. While this dissertation so far has focused on

³⁹⁶ Mays, Kyle. *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018, p. 146.

larger movements, solidarities, and systems, survivance is why we are still here and why the colonial project—in terms of the removal of Natives—has failed. The day-to-day, including both failures and successes, is what builds futures.

While there is this inherent dichotomy between the rural and urban, the traditional and the modern, and the connected and the disconnected, these bundles often live in the in-between spaces, inhabiting multiple worlds at once. They can make communities whole again by renewing knowledge and relations. Plains Cree Native studies scholar Kai Recollet contends that

It is the activation of these between spaces that is the space of futurity where the past is brought forward to critique the present and is useful in a project whereby we imagine future worlds, relationships and actions.³⁹⁷

Ethnographers have historically documented these in-between spaces that often inhabit the day-to-day. At the inaugural Indigeneity and the Arts Conference held at the University of Chicago in May 2025, Jemez Pueblo and Korean artist Debra Yepa-Pappan—co-director for the Center for Native Futures—gave the keynote talk.³⁹⁸ She spoke of creating Native-run spaces that hold control over the knowledge being shared, rather than that same knowledge being transmitted through archivists, collection leaders, curators, and others working within settler infrastructure. During her talk, she asked the audience, “How many of you know an anthropologist?” In the room of around 100 people, around two-thirds raised their hands. “The ones who didn’t raise their hands must not be Native [the entire

³⁹⁷ Recollet, Karyn. “Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix.” *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2016, pp. 91–105, p. 93.

³⁹⁸ The Indigeneity and the Arts Conference 2025 was a gathering that I had the honor to solely organize. It was kindly co-sponsored by the University of Chicago Department of Music, UChicago’s Pozen Center for Human Rights, UChicago’s Department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity, UChicago’s Karly Scherer Center for the Study of American Culture, UChicagoGRAD’s Graduate Council, UChicago’s Center for the Study of Race, Politics & Culture, and from the Center for Native Futures.

room laughed], because every Native knows an anthropologist who has come to us for knowledge.” It is critical, then, that Natives steward these between spaces. As Recollet contended, it is these spaces where we “imagine future worlds, relationships and actions.”

Just a year earlier in May 2024, the Field Museum in Chicago opened a new exhibition called “Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories.” According to the museum, “it replaces and re-examines the previous Native North America Hall that existed in this space for many years, which was created without the input of Native people themselves.”³⁹⁹ Yepa-Pappan, who was also the Community Engagement Director for this Field Museum exhibition project, explained that this exhibit is about “learning from us, not just about us.”

Frank Waln was also included and curated—with Diné anthropologist Teresa Montoya—an installation within the larger exhibition. As I walked into the alcove with my partner, there was music coming from multiple interactive sections. A small child was interacting with some tracks, while another was engaged with Waln’s flute playing. There were letters his family had sent him, regalia, and artifacts from his life. One of Waln’s first flutes was displayed, as well as a drum machine that his mother had bought him in 2002 from a local pawn shop on the Rosebud Reservation.

³⁹⁹ Retrieved from: <https://www.fieldmuseum.org/exhibitions/native-truths-our-voices-our-stories>.

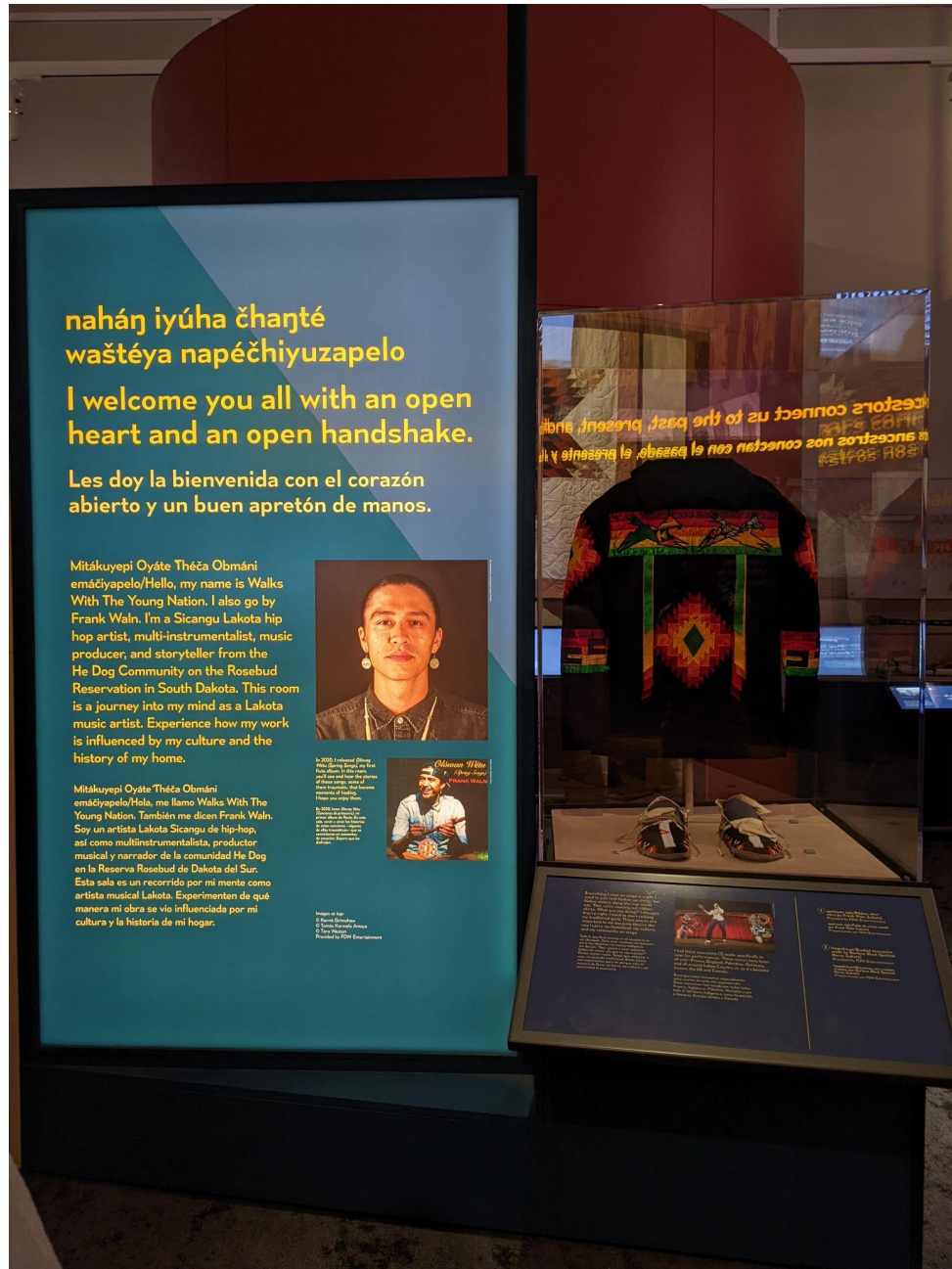


Figure 25: Image taken by author from May 2024 of Frank Waln's exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago for their new permanent exhibition called "Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories."



Figure 26: Image taken by author from May 2024 of Frank Waln's exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago for their new permanent exhibition called "Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories."

These spaces, Indigenized by Native curators, present a Native sonic archive that sounds histories once told by settlers. This chapter furthers ecologies of Indigeneity to examine how "Sound Back" restores sonic stewardship to communities. First, I expand on

Trevor Reed's "sonic sovereignty" to argue that Sound Back builds on the Land Back movement, critically engaging in sound rematriation and growing Native sonic archives. Sound Back encompasses Native record labels that assert sovereignty and self-governance, demands spatial justice by remapping settler geographies and contaminants, and remixes/loops recordings that sit in settler archives. Next, sharing fieldwork from my time in Nuuk, Greenland, Inuit-owned labels not only allow hip hop artists to rap in Kalaallisut but also contribute to their sonic archives. I then argue that Sound Back is rematriating older audio recordings, especially when used to facilitate intergenerational dialogue with ancestors and future generations through the Native hip hop sonic archive. Here I present my time in Anchorage, Alaska, weaving in the Alaska Federation of Natives weekend. Next, I argue that large gatherings such as the Santa Fe Indian Market take Sound Back through the remapping of settler spaces. Finally, I present my own sampling of an Otomí archival recording, showing how taking Sound Back can engage in intergenerational conversations. As Native hip hop is kin, my conclusion looks to what it might mean to make kin with the very beat-making and looping technology that allows Native sound to travel across space and time, building towards Native futures.

Sound Back: Archiving the Future

Native sonic archives live in oral tradition, and these ways of transmitting music are imperative to sustaining ways of life. Much of the scholarship on Native music discusses the processes of making or listening in a certain kind of present, or of documenting the past. My intervention lies in how we can think about Native music as negotiating this important connection to oral tradition/storytelling across space and time, and the archive of recorded

music that transmits oral tradition to records. Thinking of the Native sonic archive as a mixed body of sound aids in theorizing Native sonic futures.

Many Native literary authors—Waubgeshig Rice, Joy Harjo, Tommy Orange, and Louis Erdrich, to name a few—have spoken on what it means to put oral tradition into a recorded/written form. Anishinaabe author Waubgeshig Rice from the Wasauksing First Nation reflects on the conversations he has had and continues to have with elders, foregrounding them for the implementation of dialogue in his own writing, which reflects a sense of community gathering and the oral transmission of knowledge.⁴⁰⁰ Similarly, Muskogee musician and U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo shared that when she was at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe

Everybody at that school, all the students were within a generation of cultures of orality, and the love of the spoken word and metaphor. There were a lot of student writers and poets, and we would pass poems to each other.⁴⁰¹

Finally, I had the honor to be the interlocutor for a conversation with Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange for an event hosted by the University of Chicago's Office of Multicultural Affairs on November 16, 2023.⁴⁰² During our conversation, he spoke about the importance of what he described as a "chorus of voices" in his novel *There, There* which also reflects the sense of oral tradition/orality in his community. Drawing on these authors, I contend that the recording of Native music is similar to the way in which these authors think of integrating sound—voices and conversations—in their own craft. These stories

⁴⁰⁰ Commanda, Erica. "Waubgeshig Rice: Storytelling, Fiction, & Journalism." *Muskrat Magazine*, March 11, 2016. <https://muskratmagazine.com/waubgeshig-storytelling-fiction-journalism/>.

⁴⁰¹ Barajas, Joshua. "Joy Harjo on how a new Native poetry anthology fills a gap in American literature." *PBS News*, Oct 9, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/joy-harjo-on-how-a-new-native-poetry-anthology-fills-a-gap-in-american-literature>.

⁴⁰² The event RSVP and flyer can be viewed at: <https://inclusion.uchicago.edu/multicultural-student-affairs/signature-events/heritage-series/>.

still represent sovereignty even though they are in a printed form, and so does recorded music.

Hopi lawyer and ethnomusicologist Trevor Reed has theorized around thinking of sound within scholarship on sovereignty. He writes,

I want to encourage both music and sound studies scholars and the broader public to hear Indigenous songs as potentially much more than aesthetic objects or modes of representation. Rather, music and sound are often tools or processes whose uses have consequences across a variety of political and social networks, human and non-human.⁴⁰³

Reed goes on to say that

If our Indigenous songs are meant to resonate within our territories, giving voice to Indigenous authorities within those spaces, then the creation and performance of Indigenous song should be understood as an act of sovereignty.⁴⁰⁴

As kin, Native hip hop does not just give voice to Native authorities, but it is itself an authority and calls for sovereignty. Reed argues that music has consequences to both human and non-human relatives, and that we should “hear Indigenous culture...as the actual material of governance and a source of Indigenous authority.”⁴⁰⁵ Native hip hop as a relation itself, however, requires a different analysis that has a more expansive set of consequences on human and more/other-than-human relatives. Hearing Native hip hop as a relation that governs authority and kinship requires reciprocity between the artist, the listener, and hip hop itself. Hearing Native hip hop this way—and all Native sound—also

⁴⁰³ Reed, Trevor. “Sonic Sovereignty: Performing Hopi Authority in Öngtupqa.” *Journal of the Society for American Music*, vol. 13, 2019, pp. 508–530, p. 510.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 526

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 510

reflects Reed's other work on both protecting Native culture from being appropriated⁴⁰⁶ as well as copyright law on Tribal land.⁴⁰⁷

Oral tradition and knowledge are just as much an archive as settler-curated archives. Many cultures balance oral and physical objects, so I do not say this as a new claim. Thinking with Reed, however, Native music builds Native sonic futures through this very form of self-governance and sonic sovereignty. It is sounding the land through inter/intratribal coalition-building, as well as creating the infrastructure to be legible within settler-enforced legal systems. Festivals, workshops, performances at venues, releasing music online, CDs, vinyl, music videos, and music performed by the community for the community are all part of Native music's archive. These multiple modes of transmitting knowledge also reflect Dena'ina musicologist Jessica Bissett Perea's work as she contends that there is "a growing archive of Indigenous-produced mediascapes [that] expand an existing ocularcentrism by emphasizing the significance of audiovisualizations of relational and radical articulations of Indigeneity."⁴⁰⁸

In regards to music and sovereignty more broadly, I also look to scholars such as Kanaka Maoli mixed-race ethnomusicologist Sunaina Keonaona Kale who I cited in my introduction on insistence.⁴⁰⁹ As kin, Native hip hop's insistence allows for an understanding that breaks away from scholarship on Native hip hop as resistance. Kinship was never truly severed despite colonial harm. The children taken to Boarding Schools and taken from their families in the '60s Scoop, the artifacts stolen from communities, and the

⁴⁰⁶ Reed, Trevor. "Fair Use as Cultural Appropriation." *California Law Review*, vol. 109, 2021, pp. 1373–1442.

⁴⁰⁷ Reed, Trevor. "Creative Sovereignities: Should Copyright Apply on Tribal Lands?" *Journal of the Copyright Society of the USA*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2021, pp. 313–396.

⁴⁰⁸ Perea, Jessica Bissett. *Sound Relations: Native Ways of Doing Music History in Alaska*. Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 82.

⁴⁰⁹ Kale, Sunaina Keonaona. "'To All My Maka'Ā'inana': Reggae, Food Sovereignty, and Indigenous Insistence in Hawai'i." *American Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2024, pp. 441–463, p. 452.

cultural traditions that were recorded and stolen by anthropologists to preserve the “vanishing Indian” trope were always tied to their communities through kinship and relationality. Building Native futures requires us to “account for the reality that Indigenous people are deeply entangled in colonial structures.”⁴¹⁰ Building Native sonic futures requires a network of relations between humans and more/other-than-human kin. Sonic sovereignty and insistence push towards a future where we truly govern our stories.

Native-music ethnomusicologist Maxwell Yamane and Laguna Pueblo/Umoⁿhoⁿ activist Mary Phillips argue that

The storytelling of Indigenous languages by Indigenous Peoples through Indigenous ways of knowing and doing (re)centers, (re)claims, and (re)positions storytelling sovereignty so that, as one Kiowa storyteller simply put, “the stories are told by us.”⁴¹¹

While rooted in the centering of Native languages specifically, Yamane and Phillips underscore the necessity for sonic sovereignty. The act of storytelling in non-Native spaces is deeply complex. While exhibits such as the Field Museum’s “Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories” were curated by Natives, there is both validity in seeing this exhibit as an act of reclaiming space within historically violent institutions such as museums and in seeing it as still functioning within that very system. Even cultural centers and organizations that serve the Native community sometimes fall into the settler capitalist system. Looking at Native institutions requires nuance when colonial violence has targeted the very idea of kinship.

Within the settler legal system, however, building Native sonic futures requires a Land Back approach that might be thought of as “Sound Back.” Sound Back is not about

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, p. 452

⁴¹¹ Yamane, Maxwell, and Mary Phillips. “The stories are Told by Us’/U.S.: Politics of Telling Stories about Indigenous Languages with (and without) Music.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2024, pp. 22–33, p. 30.

ownership in the settler understanding, but rather about the ecologies of Indigeneity that govern our sonic stewardship. As I have contended in chapter three, Native ecologies are land- and Nation-based. Similarly, Land Back for each Nation requires a different model of rematriation, based on colonial histories and the ways the land was impacted. In a broad view, however, Nanticoke anthropologist Karelle Hall lays out a comprehensive definition of Land Back. She writes that

“Land Back” is much more than a statement; it is a speech act that is both a symbolic reminder of the violent history of the land we stand on and a legal call for its return. It’s a demand that our sovereignty be recognized through both colonial frameworks of ownership and property as well as a return to our own orientation and relationship to land. It is not asking for permission to access our traditional territories; it accompanies our tangible actions of reclaiming land. Land Back is the action of clearing trash and planting familiar trees around our ancestors’ bones. It is a return to a relationship of care...Land Back is Indigenous sovereignty.⁴¹²

Building on care, relations, and reciprocity, Palestinian education scholar/activist Razan Samara and Unangax̂ Native studies scholar Eve Tuck argue that stewardship “allows land back to refer not just to the relationships to the land that come back but the relations to community, gathering, space, and ceremony that can happen in relation to returned lands.”⁴¹³ Angami Naga Native geographies scholar Elspeth Iralu also addresses Land Back but from a mapping perspective. She argues that

⁴¹² Hall, Karelle. “Land Back: Indigenous Sovereignty as Care through Responsibility and Relationship.” *American Anthropologist* 126, 2024, pp. 682–84, p. 683.

⁴¹³ Samara, Razan and Tuck, Eve. “‘Sometimes the Land Comes Back’: Palestinian Organizers Reflect on Indigenous-Led Land Rematriation in the Bay Area.” *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2025, pp. 181–192, p. 187.

American landscape representation contained within colonial cartographies is premised on the systematic genocide of Indigenous peoples. By representing Indigenous peoples as disappeared or disappearing, colonial landscape representations clear ground for conquest and settlement...[U]nmapping denaturalises settler cartographies and exposes colonial logics of conquest and oppression while (re)mapping privileges Indigenous spatial practices to mediate colonial maps and assert sovereignty, self-determination, and nationhood.⁴¹⁴

Taken in the context of spatial justice which drives Iralu's theorizing, injecting sound into these mapping practices pushes toward Sound Back as I will further explain.

From a legal perspective, the refusal to give Land Back stems from a settler capitalist standpoint. Over 400 treaties have been broken just in the U.S., so even if land rights were given back to Nations, it would not mean the settler state would honor them, as the land is profitable. It is easier to extract land that the state owns. As political scientist Suzanne Staherski writes, "white backlash movements can be observed" through "the state's role in perpetuating capitalism as a colonizing tactic."⁴¹⁵ The next pipeline, uranium mine, fracking plant, or nuclear waste dumping site could be anywhere and to give Land Back hinders the idea of settler capitalist futurity. Native land stewardship and renewing relations are seen as threats under capitalism and extractive industries.

There are many scholars who have published in law journals about Land Back, and their work informs and reflects the current state of land rematriation (Corntassel 2021, Racehorse and Hohag 2023, Van Norman 2024, and White 2024). Shoshone-Bannock professor of law Vanessa Racehorse and Nümüü (Paiute) lawyer Anna Hohag trace the Land

⁴¹⁴ Iralu, Elspeth. "Putting Indian Country on the Map: Indigenous Practices of Spatial Justice." *Antipode: A Journal of Radical Geography*, vol. 53, no. 5, 2021, pp. 1485–1502, p. 1500.

⁴¹⁵ Staherski, Suzanne. "State Violence as White Backlash to the Land Back Movement." *CONCEPT*, vol. 45, 2022, pp. 1–27, p. 13.

Back movement within the settler infrastructure in place, laying out both state-Tribal relationships/titles/deeds as well as Tribal organizations—with financial means—buying back their land through settler laws of ownership.⁴¹⁶ Similarly, Denaakk'e (Koyukon Athabaskan) professor of law Nazune Menka contends that

With recent Supreme Court decisions like *Sackett v. EPA*, 598 U.S. 651 (2023), reducing environmental protections for federal waters by excluding seasonal wetlands, Native nation sovereignty and jurisdiction over ancestral lands and waters has become increasingly crucial. While Native nations should not have to fight for LandBack through courts, Congress, and private partnerships, their advocacy offers valuable lessons. As environmental lawyers and practitioners, strengthening our support for Indigenous land rights requires understanding these histories and stories. This knowledge can help reshape environmental laws to better serve all communities, particularly those with ancestral ties to the land dating back to time immemorial.⁴¹⁷

As the transference of government/state/private owned land continues to require hearings and navigating the legal system, the land is actively being harmed. While “advocacy [within these structures] offers valuable lessons,” it also takes precious time away from healing. As Hall wrote, Land Back “is not asking for permission to access our traditional territories.”⁴¹⁸ Land Back is not just about the physical land itself, but as we renew relations, it is also about the pieces of our cultures that were severed due to colonization.

As a lawyer, Reed’s work combines much of the settler legal language surrounding the systems that rematriation must unfortunately navigate.⁴¹⁹ He begins his 2016 article

⁴¹⁶ Racehorse and Hohag 2023

⁴¹⁷ Menka, Nazune. “The Landback Movement: Native Nations and the Restoration of Ancestral Lands.” *Natural Resources & Environment*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2025, pp. 23–27, p. 27.

⁴¹⁸ Hall 2024, p. 683

⁴¹⁹ Reed, Trevor. “Restorative Justice for Indigenous Culture.” *UCLA Law Review*, vol. 70, 2023, pp. 516–595.

mirroring Yepa-Pappan's question about anthropologists at the Indigeneity and the Arts conference.

A familiar story is told in Indian Country: a researcher arrives on a Native American reservation and begins recording ceremonial songs and oral histories; years later tribal members find, often to their horror, that these sensitive materials are available for sale, download, or streaming to the public. This scenario aptly describes the life of numerous sound recordings made on federally recognized Indian reservations prior to 1972, whose ownership status remains uninterrogated due to the complex overlap and ambiguities of copyright and federal Indian law.⁴²⁰

During my first year in grad school, a professor approached me once and asked if I knew that some of the earliest Native Mexican field recordings included the Otomí. I did not know this. Many of these early recordings are privately owned, much like cultural artifacts that end up in private collections that sit on a settler's mantle. Others are part of music collections, much like those other cultural artifacts that sit in museums. For example, Anthropologist John B. Thompkins recorded the Otomí in 1939, and these recordings are now in the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.⁴²¹ Additionally, ethnomusicologist Laura Boulton—who also “released” albums called *Navajo Songs* and *The Eskimos of Hudson Bay and Alaska*—recorded the Otomí in the 1950s as part of a project called *Indian Music of Mexico*, which is now part of the Smithsonian “Folk Ways Recordings.”⁴²² Finally, anthropologist H. Russell Bernard recorded

⁴²⁰ Reed, Trevor. “Who Owns Our Ancestors’ Voices: Tribal Claims to Pre-1972 Sound Recordings.” *Columbia Journal of Law & the Arts*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2016, pp. 275–310, pp. 275–276.

⁴²¹ They cannot be openly accessed, but a link can be found at: <https://cla.berkeley.edu/collection/?collid=11010=The%20John%20B.%20Thompkins%20collection%20of%20otomi%20sound%20recordings>.

⁴²² The album was released in 1957 and can be digitally bought for \$9.99, yet not streamed for free. It can be viewed at: <https://folkways.si.edu/indian-music-of-mexico/b/american-indian-world/album/smithsonian>.

and “released” *Otomi Songs and Stories* in 1971 which is housed in the archives of the American Philosophical Society.⁴²³ While these are just three of many examples, they represent different types of recording projects pre-1972 and further position myself within this work. Reed goes on to write that

Because the Copyright Act is silent on what law, if any, applies to pre-1972 sound recordings created on reservation lands, performers, sound engineers, and potential users of sound recordings originating in tribal jurisdictions need to look elsewhere for guidance on how to determine ownership interests in these creative works.⁴²⁴

Looking elsewhere is exactly what Reed addresses in his 2023 article on restorative justice for Native culture more broadly.

It is here, then, where Reed lays out that the Supreme Court has almost erased Nations’ ability to practice their law outside of their Tribal lands, especially when it comes to cultural rights and intellectual property (IP).⁴²⁵ As a way forward, he calls for restorative justice through what he theorizes as restorative licensing. He contends that, “[o]ne of the central innovations restorative justice provided was its focus on resolving not only the violation of law caused by an offender but also the consequences of the offense for the victim and the surrounding community.”⁴²⁶ Therefore, “[b]y adopting what [he] call[s] *restorative licensing*—something akin to an open source or Creative Commons licensing structure—patrons and follow-on users of Indigenous cultural expressions may be successfully brought under the terms of restorative justice agreements.”⁴²⁷ I heavily quote

⁴²³ The link can be viewed at:

https://indigenousguide.amphilsoc.org/index.php/search?f%5B0%5D=guide_language_content_title%3A0to mi%2C%20Mezquital&f%5B1%5D=guide_type_content_title%3ASound%20recording.

⁴²⁴ Reed 2016, pp. 277–278

⁴²⁵ Reed 2023, p. 550

⁴²⁶ Ibid, pp. 562–563

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p. 580

Reed here not to reproduce his arguments, but rather to lay out as clearly as I can what and how he has theorized restorative licensing through IP. It is this intricate and precise scholarship of sound within the legal system that draws parallels to restorative justice through land stewardship.

Building on all this intellectual labor, I begin to make sense of what “Sound Back” can mean. My intervention lies in combining sonic sovereignty with the Land Back movement. I believe that Sound Back is a growing movement of sonic stewardship. While sonic stewardship does apply to intellectual property law and “ownership” of cultural expression more broadly, I expand upon Reed to draw on ecologies of Indigeneity to argue that Sound Back is not only interested in taking back recording rights from settler archives, but it is also interested in building upon Native sonic archives that have always existed. For this chapter, I lay out three ways in which the Sound Back movement is defined. First, as record labels are notoriously known for predatory practices, starting Native-owned labels is similar to Nations buying Land Back themselves. Having businesses in place ensures legal standing that requires adherence not only to Tribal law but also to settler law regarding the IP of cultural expression. Native record labels provide sonic stewardship and legally have self-governance of the recordings, reflecting their own responsibility to archive the future. Additionally, they often provide mentoring and performance opportunities, as well as teach new artists about the music business. Sound Back through these labels is paramount for Native sonic futures.

Second, Sound Back encompasses festivals, events, shows, and gatherings that are run by Natives. Drawing on Iralu’s theorizing of re/unmapping settler geographies through spatial justice, injecting sound into these practices pushes toward Sound Back. Festivals,

open mics, performances at venues, and even just busking on the sidewalk in settler spaces assert them as Native spaces. Re/unmapping these settler geographies through sound has the power to break these very containments. Native bodies in settler spaces are often detained and surveilled under what Chicana criminal justice scholar Amy Andrea Martinez calls the colonial-carceral gaze.⁴²⁸ As Martinez and I have argued elsewhere, “[s]ound ‘temporally and spatially’ remaps colonial-carceral geographies.”⁴²⁹ As the Native sonic archive dates back thousands of years, Native sound and music in settler spaces cannot be contained in the same way that the physical body can. Sound—even just the ringing out of Native languages being spoken—and music call upon our ancestors. When heard, they “assert sovereignty, self-determination, and nationhood.”⁴³⁰ Sound Back unmaps colonial logics and remaps settler containments both temporally and spatially. Reasserting sonic sovereignty, this type of sonic stewardship allows for the very building and curating of Native futures through sound.

Third, Sound Back remixes and loops recordings from settler archives. Not only does sampling start intergenerational conversations, but the act of sampling archival recordings also brings them back to their community. It is a sonic “planting [of] familiar trees around our ancestors’ bones.”⁴³¹ Sonic stewardship lets ancestral voices ring out alongside those of living people. Just like much theft—Indian Boarding/Residential Schools, the burial grounds at these schools, the 60s Scoop, the Indian Relocation Act, the M.M.I.W.G.2S.

⁴²⁸ Martínez, Amy Andrea. *Santa Bruta—Home of El Indio Muerto: The Colonial-Carceral City's Attempt to Eliminate the “Mexican Problem.”* [Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York]. 2023.

⁴²⁹ Martinez, Amy Andrea and Francese, Jonah. “Fugitive Frequencies: Sadboy Loko, the Colonial-Carceral Gaze, and the Sonic Refusal of Mexican/Chicano Criminalization.” In review for *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, p. 9.

Additionally, the “temporally and spatially” is from Recollet 2016, p. 92

⁴³⁰ Iralu 2021, p. 1500

⁴³¹ Hall 2024, p. 683

epidemic, and so much more—that severed people from their culture, these field recordings often tell stories of a time before these practices were banned. Sampling them is sonically bringing our ancestors home. As a cited in my introduction, through a character in *Wandering Stars*, Tommy Orange writes that the goal was

to try and make musical loops that wouldn't sound or feel like loops because of the way they were built, that's the way out of a loop. Every day is a loop...Every day is life convincing us it's not a loop.⁴³²

Sampling old field recordings and reclaiming them within larger lineages of Native sound allows us to create our own loops that we self-govern. The loops we make with these recordings help us find a way out of the loop of the continued apocalypse.

Being stewards of Native sound through labels, live performances, and rematriated archival recordings builds futures by bringing the past forward, the very act that Indigenous futurism is built upon. Building futures requires multiple generations. Sonically owning space within the music industry is one way forward towards Sound Back.

“They are looking down on us from up there”: Atlantic Music and Arctic Sounds

I arrived in Nuuk, Greenland’s capital, on Monday June 16, 2025 with my friend, colleague, and linguistic anthropologist Roberto Young. While we were primarily there for a Phillips Fund for Native American Research grant from the American Philosophical Society, I was excited to see the hip hop scene. Hip hop has a long history in Greenland, as “Greenlandic

⁴³² Orange, Tommy. *Wandering Stars*. Knopf: New York, 2024, p. 305.

Inuit group Nuuk Posse, who formed in 1985, was the first group to rap in Kalaallisut.”⁴³³

Their debut album, “Sussa Appinnagu,” however, was not released until 1992 on ULO Records, an Inuit-owned label based in Sisimiut, Greenland. The first music video that they released from this record was called “Qitik” [“Sharp”]. The video begins with one of the members sitting in the recording studio with headphones on.

“The first Greenlandic rap,” he says.

“Great, let’s hear it,” someone says from off camera.

“You wanna hear it?”

“Yeah why not.”

“Okay, here it is.”⁴³⁴

The beat drops with only an 808 on the 1, and-of-1, 3, and finally on the and-of-3. After four measures of just the 808, a funk breakbeat comes in. Four bars later, the full beat hits.

During the next 16 bars—8 of one section and 8 of another—imagery of Nuuk plays on the video. People are skateboarding, graffiti covers the walls, people are on a dance floor, and a DJ is scratching a record. Finally, the rapper begins in front of a tagged wall, cutting to a video of him walking between the Bloks, the largest housing buildings in Nuuk, historically designated for the Kalaalit People, not the Danish settlers.⁴³⁵

Hip hop has long been a part of Inuit life. While live performances are of course critical to creating community, an important aspect of the Inuit music scene is the role of record labels. While Nuuk Posse recorded their first album on ULO Records in Sisimiut,

⁴³³ Francese, Jonah. “‘Red Future’: Native Hip Hop Bundles, Native Futurities, and the Native Technosphere.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2025, pp. 227–235, p. 229.

⁴³⁴ magiske. “Nuuk Posse - Qitik.” YouTube, November 24, 2008.

<https://youtu.be/p2xdYseLoRE?si=ZPFkPQs4vZt1BH2F>

⁴³⁵ I say “Kalaallit People” in this chapter to refer to those Inuk/Inuit People who speak Kalaallisut. When speaking of Greenland National Day, I say “Inuk” as I am speaking of all Native People on Greenland.

Nuuk also has an Inuit-owned record label, Atlantic Music, not affiliated with or under Atlantic Records. On Thursday, June 19, 2025, Roberto and I walked down the hill from our Airbnb to the street intersection of Inspektørbakken and H.J. Rinjip Aqqutaa. Located across from the main Nuuk Center shopping area, Atlantic Music was a small house with stairs leading up to a porch. We walked inside and were greeted by the owner, Ejvind Elsner. Elsner first opened Atlantic Music in 1990 in his southern Greenland town of Nanortalik, where he sold gear and records out of a small garage.⁴³⁶ In 1998, he opened the Atlantic Studio and soon realized that the demand was high enough to require a move to Nuuk in 2001. Since moving to Nuuk, they have recorded over a thousand albums in the studio, provided instruments for Nuuk's music scene, and sold/distributed records across Greenland. Elsner prides Atlantic Music on being a place that records music in Kalaallisut, as well as a family business where his wife, Marianne, and son, Christian, work. I look to Greenland as perhaps a model. Despite having only 50,000 people, by 1990 Greenland already had six Native record labels that had released thousands of records since the 1970s. Not only were they able to distribute this music across the country through the Kalaallit Nunaata Radio station, but they also had sovereignty over their musical expression. These six labels were "ULO with Aqisseq Studio under them, Sermit Records, Sila Music (The Silamiut Theater), Sisimiut Tusaataat, Melos, and the newest label, Atlantic Music."⁴³⁷

As we walked around the store, the vast majority of vinyl and CDs were by Greenlandic groups. In 2005, Kalaallit rapper Peand-eL, now regarded as one of Greenland's hip hop elders, released his album "Eqqissitinnga." As I walked through the first floor flipping through the records, I saw his album which was recorded at Atlantic Studio.

⁴³⁶ Retrieved from: <https://atlanticmusicshop.gl/information/atlantic-music-aps/>.

⁴³⁷ Elsner, Ejvind. "History of Greenlandic Music." N.d. <https://atlanticmusicshop.gl/music-history-292/>.

Native-owned record labels are deeply important for building sonic Native futures, providing space for Natives to exercise sonic stewardship over their cultural expression. Sonic self-governance, especially for Native languages, is integral to the “storytelling sovereignty” that Yamane and Phillips described for the Kiowa language.⁴³⁸ Elsner’s sons, Christian and Frederik, are in one of Greenland’s most successful bands, Nanook. As they continued to grow in popularity—including a performance at the Kennedy Center in 2013—Sony Records reached out, but Nanook “rejected Sony’s offer of a contract because the condition was that they switch to English.”⁴³⁹ While Nanook is not a hip hop group, their story represents the need for Native sonic stewardship and Sound Back within the recording industry. Having labels like Atlantic Music allows artists like Peand-eL to rap in Kalaallisut and to exercise sovereignty over their own language and storytelling practices.

Another artist who exclusively raps in Kalaallisut is Tarrak. Also born in Nanortalik, Tarrak is at the forefront of Sound Back as a means to building Native futures. His debut album *FxGx5* was released in 2016, and on it was a track called “Tupilak.”⁴⁴⁰ In the music video, Tarrak raps in front of the statue of Hans Egede, a Danish-Norwegian Lutheran missionary who represents colonization to the Kalaallit people, settling Nuuk in 1721 and Christianizing the Kalaallit People. As Tarrak raps in Kalaallisut, he says

My fellow kalaaleq, WAKE UP

My fellow kalaaleq, TALK BACK

My fellow kalaaleq, BE MAD

My fellow kalaaleq, MAKE YOURSELF

⁴³⁸ Yamane and Phillips 2024, p. 30

⁴³⁹ Bergsson, Felix. “Elsner bræður og Ísbjarnarguðinn.” *Rúv*, April 25, 2015. <https://www.ruv.is/oflokka-eldra-efni/elsner-braedur-og-isbjarnargudinn>.

⁴⁴⁰ The music video can be viewed at: https://youtu.be/sd-JcV0_NAA?si=WK40TbKOFGZQfNgs.

My fellow kalaaleq, BE INDEPENDENT

Show them that you can, don't let yourself fall to deep

They are looking down on us from up there.⁴⁴¹

This last line, “they are looking down on us from up there” cuts to a shot of the Hans Egede statue atop its hill in Nuuk.

Roberto and I left Atlantic Music and made the ten-minute walk to the waterfront. Past a rocky beach, a street led up a hill that wound its way along a cliff with waterfront properties. As we climbed the hill, we finally reached the Hans Egede statue. As I attempted to read the plaque in Danish, I thought of Tarrak's video and all that he has stood for since that 2016 release. As Greenlandic National Day was only a few days away, a day that theoretically celebrates the Kalaallit People and culture, Hans Egede and the settlers who live atop this hill still look down on people like Tarrak.



Figure 27: Image taken by author of Nuuk from the top of the hill where the Hans Egede statue sits.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid

Two months before I arrived in Nuuk, a town an hour flight north of Nuuk called Sisimiut hosted the Arctic Sounds Festival. Started in 2014, Arctic Sounds Festival showcases artists from across the Arctic for a three-day festival of performances and workshops. The festival is organized by Arctic Sounds Management ApS, which, like Atlantic Music, is part of the Sound Back movement. As an organization that does many things—artist management, project management, event management, music release, music and sound production, technical support, fundraising, and consulting—they provide sonic stewardship to artists who do not have the same sovereignty when signed to settler-owned labels.⁴⁴² Tarrak is not only an artist with Arctic Sounds Management ApS, but also one of the organizers of the Arctic Sounds Festival, and he performed at Arctic Sounds 2025.

Drawing on the ecologies of Indigeneity, Tarrak is not just a hip hop artist. Rather, he is constantly coalition-building with other Native artists and using his means to provide others with self-governance of sound. While this dissertation is about hip hop music, Sound Back encompasses the language heard on the streets as a form of sonic stewardship. Similar to Prolific the Rapper sampling a call to the police at Standing Rock, Tarrak samples a call to the police by a settler in “Tupilak.”

They'll tell a homeless Kalaaleq to die

He doesn't deserve to live!

[Actual emergency call]

Caller: “There's a very drunken man sleeping on the ground.”

Respondent: “Yes, what is he? Is he a Dane or a Greenlander?”⁴⁴³

⁴⁴² Retrieved from: <https://www.arcticsounds.gl/management>.

⁴⁴³ Lyrics transcribed from the music video: https://youtu.be/sd-JcV0_NAA?si=WK40TbKOFGZQfNGs.

While unhoused people absolutely deserve shelter, especially in a place as cold as Greenland, the fact that the first thing the respondent asks is if he is Danish or Greenlandic represents the very words that Tarrak raps—settler infrastructure is aimed at eliminating Native futures. For Greenland, language is critical for these futures.

Unlike the U.S., where there are hundreds of Native languages, Greenland only has three Inuit dialects: Kalaallisut (West Greenland), Tunumiisut (East Greenland), and Inuktun (North Greenland). Of the around 56,000 Inuit People in Greenland, just over 50,000 speak Kalaallisut, making the percentage of speakers much higher than any Native community in the U.S. or Canada. However, just like the U.S., their language has no social or political power within the settler infrastructure. The Danish settlers run the government, the banks, the housing market, the education system, and every facet of life in Nuuk. While Kalaallit People are free to speak their language among themselves, they have to speak Danish to survive. Tarrak cares deeply about sonic sovereignty and the power of his language under self-governance. In an interview with the *Journal of the North Atlantic and Arctic*, he said how “[he] want[s] [his] children to grow up in a Greenland where they don’t need to learn Danish to secure a better future” and where they can “have a true kalak-style future in Greenland.”⁴⁴⁴ Native futures always bring the past forward. Tarrak explains that

We don't really know who we are as a people. We feel inferior. We've heard of Hans Egede and the Vikings, but who were our ancestors? Are their names in the history books?⁴⁴⁵

Erasure of history often severs futures when the past cannot be brought forward in educational spaces. In an education system exclusively in Danish, history is taught through

⁴⁴⁴ Bianco, Nauja. “Greenlanders - Wake Up!” *Journal of the North Atlantic and Arctic*, November 2024, <https://www.jonaa.org/content/greenlanders-wake-up>.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid

a colonial lens. While Kalaallisut is spoken throughout Nuuk, settlers rarely learn the language, even those who have lived there for fifty years.

Tarrak continues to use Kalaallisut to build Native sonic futures through the ecologies of Indigeneity. His social media page is always drawing connections and coalition-building. In a post from January 15, 2025, at the height of President Trump's public statements about buying Greenland—and just a week after Donald Trump Jr. visited Nuuk on January 7, 2025—Tarrak questioned what the U.S. would actually do for the Kalaallit People given the U.S.'s own violent history.

Look how America treats their own Indigenous People. Look! The pipelines, the residential schools, the forcibly removing Indigenous children from their parents.⁴⁴⁶

Tarrak continues to place himself within the broader ecologies of Indigeneity through his hip hop practices.

In December of 2025, the global organization In Place of War named Tarrak as one of their fellows. In Place of War “was established to recognise artists who have contributed to positive social impact consistently throughout their careers and includes some of the world's most influential artists, performers and entertainment organisations.”⁴⁴⁷ Their fellows specifically “were awarded for their work protecting cultures, values and identities and using music to unify, bring about positive change and fight truth to power.”⁴⁴⁸ Alongside Tarrak was Irish group Kneecap who, although not Native, also continue to take Sound Back through Irish language hip hop in spite of England's historic settler-colonial laws

⁴⁴⁶ joseftarrak. “The price of Greenland @joerogan I'm m still looking for my invite.” *Instagram*, January 15, 2025. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DE1x-J8uZ2J/>.

⁴⁴⁷ in_place_of_war. “Last week we celebrated an incredible year of achievements at our annual Fellowship Awards & Fundraising evening, hosted by In Place of War Fellow Brian Eno at his studio.” *Instagram*. December 18, 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DSae3k4jKrK/?img_index=1.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid

criminalizing the Irish language. Sound Back is not just a growing movement—it is taking back sound as an integral part of cultural expression. Taking Sound Back for Tarrak is not just a call to speak Kalaallisut, but also a call to build infrastructure that enables Native sonic stewardship, whether that be Native record labels or festivals such as Arctic Sounds.

Greenland National Day

Given the colonial history of Greenland, Greenland National Day is complicated. It was first instituted as a holiday on June 21, 1983. It was this same day, June 21, that the Act on Greenland Self-Government was passed in 2009. Critically, the act stated that “the Greenlandic language is recognised as the official language in Greenland.”⁴⁴⁹ Despite these legal arrangements, the act contends that

Danish may still be used in official matters, cf. Greenland Parliament Act on case handling procedures in public administration. The question of educational instruction in Danish is not governed by the Self-Government Act, but it is assumed that the Self-Government authorities must ensure provision of education in Danish and other relevant languages that would enable Greenlandic youth to pursue further education in Denmark and other countries.⁴⁵⁰

Greenland National Day, therefore, requires an understanding of how Inuk People have been historically treated as well as their fight for sonic sovereignty through this recognition of Kalaallisut. Historically, settlers and missionaries systematically erased song, dance, and drum practices. While there has been work to reclaim them, many have been lost or not yet revitalized/relearned. Therefore, loudly claiming language by speaking, singing, and

⁴⁴⁹ Retrieved from: <https://english.stm.dk/the-prime-ministers-office/the-unity-of-the-realm/greenland/>.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid

rapping in Kalaallisut is a form of Sound Back that is not possible for much of their traditional music. Greenland National Day is the time of year that attracts the most Danish tourists, not just for the holiday itself, but also for the summer solstice. June of 2025 also marked the very first direct flight to Nuuk from the U.S., a United Airlines flight from Newark on June 14, 2025. Greenland National Day 2025 was therefore attended by an even larger number of tourists than usual. Speaking Kalaallisut—and refusing to speak Danish or English—is an act of self-governance.

On June 21, 2025, Roberto and I walked into the Katersortarfik, the local community center in Nuuk. Guitar player and vocalist René Brandt had just started five minutes before. The space looked like an old U.S. gymnasium with a stage on the entrance side just to our right. In the very back were long tables full of mostly Danish folks, while mostly Inuit folks sat in chairs in a rough theater style setup. On either side of the community center there were tables with Kalaallit Kaagiat (Inuit sweet cinnamon raisin bread), butter, and coffee—all free for attendees. We walked over to the stage-left side of the space, and a community member helped us by handing over the remaining three stacked chairs next to him. We placed them on the floor, and more folks also came over with extra chairs as we formed a new row.

René was playing a solo set, composed mostly of the same songs from the previous night when we had seen him at the Skyline Bar, but he did not play any English songs. Additionally, that night he only spoke in Kalaallisut on the mic. By the end of René's set, rows upon rows of chairs had been added. While no one was in front of us when we first sat down, now there were at least eight rows in front of us, still leaving a space for the children to run around in front of the stage. In total, there were probably two hundred people there.

After René was Inuk, a famous cross-genre band that played rock/folk music. Halfway through their set, KimOJax, a Kalaallit rapper came up and did a collaboration track with them. He hyped the crowd up and rapped in Kalaallisut, set to the backdrop of guitars, bass, and drums playing a I-V-vi-IV (F-C-Dm-Bb). After the two verses and chorus, the lead singer yelled out “KimOJax!” Emerging from backstage, KimOJax came out with a handheld mic and began to rap. Many members of the crowd pulled out their phones to record, while others swayed to the beat. Many others knew all the words and were rapping along. KimOJax ended his verse jumping in the air as Inuk went to another chorus, only for him to call out the guitar player for a solo as he continued to serve as a hype man throughout the solo.



Figure 28: Image taken by author of KimOJax rapping during Inuk's set.

There was an Inuit elder named Klara who sat next to me on my left. She was taking videos the whole time and started talking to me in English. She would often give a guttural scream when lyrics hit her a certain way, or when something happened musically that she loved. After Inuk's set ended, she was saying how excited she was for Inua, the last band. During the last transition, almost all the Danish folks sitting in the back on the long tables left, and more and more Inuit People poured in to fill the empty seats. Everyone we had seen walking around throughout the week was there. We recognized so many faces and gave nods of recognition as people walked by us.

Inua finally came on right at 9 PM, and the crowd loudly cheered. They said they were celebrating fifty years since their first independently released record—their first record was released on ULO Records. Klara was extremely kind and would translate things for us as they spoke or sang. She would be like “oh, this song is about the summer and finally getting to go outside” or “this song is about Inuit power, telling the Danish and other people to get out of Greenland and leave us alone.” When the set ended, the whole crowd chanted “aammalu,” which, through context clues, I think meant “one more.” Unfortunately, they did not play another because the fireworks were about to go off to end Greenlandic National Day.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, hip hop is just one part of Native life, often woven in with so many other musical styles at celebrations, festivals, and other performances. Interconnectivity as a basis for community was also reflected in Greenland. Speaking, singing, and rapping exclusively in Kalaallisut represents a Sound Back approach to a place like Greenland, which is still a Danish territory. Sound Back states their sovereignty and is a “reminder of the violent history of the land we stand on and a legal call

for its return.”⁴⁵¹ Or in other words, it is a “reminder of the violent history” of the devaluing of Inuit languages and the erasure of Inuit song, dance, and drumming practices.⁴⁵² Speaking, singing, and rapping exclusively in Kalaallisut is a “call for its return.”⁴⁵³ As Reed argued, “Indigenous songs are meant to resonate within our territories.”⁴⁵⁴ Through social, political, and racial hierarchies, Kalaallit sonic stewardship exists because of the very bodies that make and listen to this music. Especially through the use of Kalaallisut—both lyrics and the refusal to speak Danish in between songs when speaking on the microphone—Kalaallit music takes up sonic space that remaps the Danes’ own rejection to engage in Kalaallisut, demanding Sound Back.

The Music of Masks

On October 13, 2025—Indigenous Peoples' Day in the U.S.—my partner and I left a “Dena’ina Place Names” panel at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) and made our way to the Anchorage Museum for the film screening of “So Surreal: Behind the Masks.”⁴⁵⁵ We parked our car rental and made our way to the payment kiosk, only to find an elder struggling to get the machine to work. We helped her, then paid ourselves, and made our way upstairs to the museum entrance, finally finding our seats in the auditorium. Only later did I realize that the elder we helped was Marie Meade, a UAA professor of Yup’ik Language,

⁴⁵¹ Hall 2024, p. 683

⁴⁵² Ibid, p. 683

⁴⁵³ Ibid, p. 683

⁴⁵⁴ Reed 2019, p. 526

⁴⁵⁵ The Anchorage Museum as an institution has historically been interested in Native hip hop of the arctic. In 2017, they brought in SlinCraze who is a Sami hip hop artist who raps in the Sami language. The following year, they released a documentary called “We Up: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North,” which actually featured Inuk rapper KimOJax from Nuuk. This documentary can be viewed at: <https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/about-us/stories-and-voices/we-up/>.

Yup'ik Orthography, and Alaska Native Dance, as well as the mother of two members of Pamyua.⁴⁵⁶

At 6:30 PM, Pamyua members Phillip Blanchett and Ossie Kairaiuak came on stage with the interlocutor for the night, an Anchorage Museum staff member. Blanchett and Kairaiuak explained their roles in the film, how they wrote the music, and the importance of performing traditional mask songs. Perea has documented that Pamyua regard their music as “Tribal Funk,” and has shown that hip hop has an important influence on (and is part of) their music. In a conversation between Perea and Phillip Blanchett, Phillip said he and his brother “would listen to all the underground hip hop stations, or rap stations, and record as much music as we could.”⁴⁵⁷ He went on to say that “[t]he first album I ever bought was Grandmaster Flash.”⁴⁵⁸ Pamyua not only embodies the ecologies of Indigeneity, but also the interconnectedness of Native music across genres.

After speaking about their roles in the film, Blanchett and Kairaiuak performed a vocal duet just the two of them to mark the start of the film screening. “So Surreal: Behind the Masks,” directed by Cree storyteller Neil Diamond, was a story of West Coast Native masks being stolen from as far south as Vancouver to as far north as Yup’ik territory in Alaska. Documenting how these masks traveled between collectors and museums to influence the surrealist art movement, Diamond also showed the efforts underway to bring them home to their communities. After the film was complete, Diamond, Blanchett, Kairaiuak, and the interlocutor got on stage for a panel. While the panel touched upon many topics, the most important for this dissertation was Kairaiuak's view that masks have

⁴⁵⁶ Perea has a whole section in her book on Marie Meade titled “Marie Arnaq Meade, Pamyua, and Anchorage” which can be found at: Perea 2021, pp. 175–185.

⁴⁵⁷ Perea 2021, p. 196

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 196

stories and songs associated with them.⁴⁵⁹ Without a certain mask, one cannot tell/sing/sound its story. Perea explains further that “[m]asks were always danced and accompanied by a song composed for that mask alone.”⁴⁶⁰ It is this kinship that requires an analysis rooted in relationality.

Bringing masks home is not just bringing a cultural object back to a Native community, but also returning the sonic stewardship of the songs composed for these masks. This example shows how complex the Sound Back movement can be. As Native music is woven into so many aspects of life, a relational analysis helps us understand that bringing the mask home is bringing the song home. One cannot be brought home without the other. Perea argues “that such radical and improvised archives offer critical relational analyses of archival logics, archival methods, and theorizations of the archive.”⁴⁶¹ Drawing on Perea’s theorization, Sound Back offers not only relational analyses but also spatial and temporal ones. By rematriating sound, ancestors once again get placed into lineages of sound and intergenerational conversations that trace back to time immemorial.

Land Back Hip Hop

A few days later, on October 18, 2025, my partner and I walked into Williwaw Social in downtown Anchorage. The event was a benefit concert for the Alaska Native Heritage Center and was also the culmination of the Alaska Federation of Natives, a four-day gathering at the Denina Center that I had also attended. Williwaw Social had a bar area near the entrance, and just to the left of the bar was a surprise bag area. Artists from the Alaska

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid in her section “Deep Down: A Sound Relations Model” on pp. 221–230.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 191

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, p. 7

Natives Federation had wrapped items, and three tables were packed with these bundles. To the right of the bar was another room with a stage. We got a drink and headed to the other room just before C.L.A.N. came on, a Tlingit hip hop duo composed of Grizzly Brown and YNG Native. Although geographically far from the Lower 48, C.L.A.N. engages the ecologies of Indigeneity and collaborates with artists from as far as the Southwest. On their album *Been Around*, released on June 13, 2025, they feature both A\$h Da Hunter and Nataanii Means.

C.L.A.N. walked on stage and the crowd cheered as Grizzly Brown got on the mic. “How is everyone doing tonight?” The crowd yelled back. He went on to state his relations to his Tlingit clan, and thanked Alaska Native Heritage Center for having them. Critical for this section, they performed LANDBACK from their 2022 EP *CHANGE*.



Figure 29: Image taken by author of C.L.A.N. and Grizzly Brown performing at the Williwaw Social in downtown Anchorage on October 18, 2025.

While I have argued that Native hip hop sounds the Land Back movement, I now further that to argue that Land Back can also “land” the Sound Back movement. In chapter three, I posited that a Native hip hop ecology sounds ecological studies, not by conflating different community relationships to land, but through the coalition-building of the cypher. Razan Samara and Eve Tuck argued that land stewardship “allows land back to refer not just to the relationships to the land that come back but the relations to community, gathering, space, and ceremony that can happen in relation to returned lands.”⁴⁶² While Sound Back can encapsulate many ways of sound rematriation, landing the Sound Back movement is critical to relationality and reciprocity. Sound Back cannot be a call that replicates settler containments and ancestral separation. Native-curated exhibits and Native-run museums are important spaces to bring back the sound to, but if these spaces do not actively center the land and the relations these sounds carry, they are still severed from their ancestors.

I argue that tracks such as C.L.A.N.’s “LANDBACK” is Land Back hip hop that is concerned with what Recollet defines as “land-ing.” In chapter two, I argued that land-ing aids in hip hop as pedagogy. In this chapter, however, I use “land-ing” to sound ecologies. Recollet explains that

An Indigifuturist land-based methodology is concerned with a series of land-ings which are written/recorded here as embodied provocations. These diasporic movements connect within an expansive atmospheric land-base through the act of a fall.⁴⁶³

While Recollet situates their work with Native dance choreographies and the fall of the body within bodily gestures, Sound Back through Land Back hip hop uses land-ing to center the fall—the drop—of the beat. As breakbeats turn into loops, land-ing “exposes the deep

⁴⁶² Razan and Tuck 2025, p. 187

⁴⁶³ Recollet, Karyn. “Choreographies of the Fall: Futurity Bundles & Landing when Future Falls are Immanent.” *Theatre Magazine*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2019, pp. 89–105, p. 91.

layers of overflow that contain atmospheric, top sedimentary, aqueous, and subaqueous relationships with land as sources of connectivity.”⁴⁶⁴ Land-ing hip hop is not only to sound the land, but it also exposes the layers of sonic lineages required for intergenerational conversations through sampling and citational practices. The very settler containments that hold audio recordings and make Natives a relic of the past are the same containments that see Native hip hop as a threat to settler futurity. Taking Sound Back through sonic stewardship of Land Back hip hop is a form of self-governance that many Native hip hop artists fight for.

Land Back hip hop is also Two-Spirit Wari poet and rapper Bobby Sanchez’s song “Quechua 101 Land Back Please.” It is Mexica hip hop artist and activist Xuihtezcatl’s “Take It All Back,” Def-i’s “Water Is Life,” and JB the First Lady, Eternia, and Missy D’s “Planting Seeds.” It is also Cree hip hop artist Dakota Bear’s record label, Land Back Records. Having grown up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and now living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Dakota Bear released his first single as a hip hop artist, “Paper Crowns,” in 2017. Then, in 2020, he and his partner, Casey Desjarlais, launched Decolonial Clothing Co. aimed at showing Native pride through streetwear. One of their first lines was the “Land Back Collection.” Just two years later, they started Land Back Records in 2022.

Land Back Records not only represents Land Back hip hop through Dakota Bear as a hip hop artist, but also embodies Sound Back by buying back space within the music industry to center sonic stewardship. In an interview with *The Georgia Straight*, Dakota Bear said that they have “helped artists push their first project, helped artists record their

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 91

first songs; some of them [secure their] first festival performances.”⁴⁶⁵ He went on to say that “[t]he mentorship we offer—and that I have offered to over 100 Indigenous youth into business over the past years—really helps empower the revitalization of our economies.”⁴⁶⁶ By taking Sound Back through mentorship and growing the visibility of Native musicians, Land Back Records is not only building ecologies of Indigeneity but also Native economies.

A year earlier, on August 28, 2021, Dakota Bear and Desjarlais—along with Drezus—started the first Native music festival in Vancouver called Circles, which features only Native vendors. Held at Any Livingstone Park, just east of downtown, Circles attracted 4,000 attendees and featured Native hip hop artists such as Mz Shellz, Mattmac, Prado, Drezus, and many others, including Dakota Bear himself. Circles 2023 had Drezus back with the inclusion of other Native hip hop artists like Boslen and SouFy, this time held at Sunset Beach, which attracted 7,000 attendees. In 2024, they started “Land Back Nights” at the Fortune Sound Club, a concert series for Native musicians. Despite making clothes at home and renting warehouse space, 2024 also saw Decolonial Clothing Co. finally open its official storefront in Vancouver. As Dakota Bear said, “[i]t’s like an ecosystem... They all work together towards the same mission.”⁴⁶⁷ This ecosystem and these ecologies of Indigeneity are rooted in land and all our relations. Land Back hip hop, as its own relation, is woven into all that Dakota Bear does. Sound Back to him is not just about the music; it is about building Native futures through sound.

⁴⁶⁵ Gill, Suneet. “Land Back Records Helps Indigenous Musicians Amplify Their Craft and Culture.” *The Georgia Straight*. October 2nd, 2024.
<https://www.straight.com/music/land-back-records-helps-indigenous-musicians-amplify-their-craft-and-culture#>.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid

Reclaiming Settler Spaces through Sound Back

The SWAIA (Southwest Association for Indian Arts) Santa Fe Indian Market is one of the largest gatherings of Natives on Turtle Island. Santa Fe, however, has a long colonial history. The very making of the Santa Fe Indian Market takes Sound Back not only through the conversations and voices of Natives who pack downtown, but also through the music being performed. To understand why and how Sound Back is important to the market, I must first provide an abbreviated history of how the market came to be.

The story starts with Santa Fe already being a settlement. As the railways extended into the west, they finally reached Santa Fe on February 9, 1880.⁴⁶⁸ The presence of the Diné, Pueblo, and Apache Nations made the Southwest a desired location for art collectors as well as early anthropologists who sought “authentic” Native art.⁴⁶⁹ The early Santa Fe Railyard shipped a large amount of Diné and Pueblo pottery—as well as other arts and crafts—back to the east coast and beyond.⁴⁷⁰ Due to growing interest from settlers, the 1915 San Diego World's Fair included a Southwest Pavilion that featured an “Indian Pueblo” and recreations of cliff dwellings, as well as selling pottery by Native artists.⁴⁷¹ Fashioned after Native art displays at many Anglo-run fairs, 1922 saw the inaugural Southwest Indian Art Fair and Industrial Arts and Crafts Exposition, sponsored by the Museum of New Mexico. The following was written in a 1923 brochure.

The Southwest Indian Fair and Industrial Arts and Crafts Exhibition of 1923, is the second of its scope and character to be held in Santa Fe. The objects in the exhibition are the encouragement of native arts and crafts among the Indians; to revive old arts, and keep the

⁴⁶⁸ Tobias, Henry J., and Charles E. Woodhouse. “The Railroad and Santa Fe.” In Tobias, Henry J., and Charles E. Woodhouse. *Santa Fe: A Modern History, 1880-1990*. UNM Press, 2001.

⁴⁶⁹ swaia. “History.” N.d. <https://www.swaia.org/history>.

⁴⁷⁰ Tobias and Woodhouse 2001

⁴⁷¹ swaia. “History.” N.d. <https://www.swaia.org/history>.

arts of each tribe and pueblo as distinctive as possible; the establishment and locating of markets for all Indian products, the securing of reasonable prices; authentication of all handicraft offered for sale and protection to the Indian in all his business dealings with traders and buyers.⁴⁷²

Importantly, this moment in time was also when the New Mexico Association of Indian Affairs (NMAIA) was formed, which later became known as the Southwestern Association of Indian Affairs and, finally, the Southwest Association for Indian Arts as it is today.⁴⁷³ In 1931, however, the NMAIA finally cut the Museum of New Mexico out as an organizer, marking an important shift in control over Native art and the Indian Market more broadly.⁴⁷⁴ These “Southwest Indian Fairs” were held in many local Pueblo communities, building a space mostly free of the settler gaze.⁴⁷⁵ The NMAIA officially began to sponsor the fairs in 1934, and the Indian Market returned to Santa Fe in 1936.⁴⁷⁶ Critical for the trajectory of the Market, the Institute of American Indian Arts was formed in 1962, influencing generations of Native artists to come.⁴⁷⁷ Today, the Santa Fe Indian Market attracts thousands of artists, vendors, fashion designers, Sundance film directors, musicians, and Native celebrities alike. In 2024, over 125,000 people attended, making it one of the largest gatherings of Natives on Turtle Island.⁴⁷⁸

SWAIA's Santa Fe Indian Market, as it is conceived of today, is a space for congregating and for reclaiming cities against the colonial norm of urban areas as “non-Native.” Counter to colonial narratives, holding events and taking up space is a kind of

⁴⁷² Ibid

⁴⁷³ Ibid

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid

spatial tagging that I see operating within the Sound Back movement. Recollet considers spatial tagging to be “interpreted as a manifestation of an Indigenous futurity through the production of counter spaces.”⁴⁷⁹ They also see bringing the past forward into futures as “spatially tagging the urban environment as Indigenous territory,” including “voiced and sung activations.”⁴⁸⁰ Much like the Santa Fe Railyard Native graffiti exhibited at the Digable Planets performance from chapter one, the Native artists at the Santa Fe Indian Market are demanding Sound Back and the return of sonic stewardship by the very reclaiming of sound in urban environments. As “loud” and “bustling” places, cities are full of sound when rural areas are often depicted as “quiet.” Injecting a city like Santa Fe with the sound of 125,000 Natives is radically taking Sound Back.

While I attended many events over the course of the weekend, the Grand Exit 5 at the Tumbleroot Brewery and Distillery is critical as it was curated by Def-i. Playing on grand entry and grand exit at powwows, Def-i naming his event Grand Exit 5—“5” being the fifth year he has put on this event—calls upon powwow culture and the way Natives gather at these types of events. On Sunday, August 18, 2024, I parked my car in the gravel parking lot of Tumbleroot and made my way through the patio to the entrance. As I stepped inside, I was greeted by Def-i’s sister whom I had met a few days earlier. We chatted for a bit before I made my way in. The layout had the bar on the right-hand side, with the stage in the far back. The dancefloor was actually on a lower level, meaning that the venue was all on the same floor, including the stage, and then there were descending steps to get down to the dancefloor, which was around six feet below the rest of the venue. I walked over to some tables just behind the dancefloor and took a seat that had a railing overlooking the

⁴⁷⁹ Recollet 2016, p. 95

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 95

dancefloor with a direct view of the stage. Nuchu (Southern Ute/Mountain Ute/Cheyenne) DJ Ill Audia was spinning tracks. As the crowd began to grow, I watched her read the room and raise the intensity with each track.

The first act was A\$h Da Hunter, whose first song had no beat and was only accompanied by Diné pianist and ethnomusicologist Renata Yazzie. Throughout her set, A\$h rapped about growing up on the reservation and empowering Native women to fight domestic abuse and chase their dreams. After A\$h was Dakota-Arikara rapper Stuart James whom I had seen multiple times perform in Detroit. In between songs, he asked the crowd, “How many of y’all grew up on the Rez?” About half the room raised their hand and cheered.

Man I love my Rez but y’all know that it’s grimy as fuck out there. It ain’t like these cities. But that’s what made us, and we never forget what raised us.

He then went into his track “Big Dreams.”

Geneviève Gros-Louis Salamone—a violinist whose compositions have served as soundtracks to National Geographic documentaries—followed James, then Diné punk rock group The Flossies, and then Diné folk group Hataalii whose instrumentation was a harmonica, acoustic guitar, and steel string guitar. In the middle of Hataalii’s set, Taboo—of the Black Eyed Peas—pulled up to Tumbleroot, saying hello to everyone and catching up with folks. At around 11:15 PM, Def-i finally took the stage and thanked everyone for coming, shouting out Taboo and everyone who made the night possible. At this point, the large room was packed with probably 200 plus people. They all cheered and began to get excited for Def-i’s set. During his set, Def-i brought up Stuart James and they performed a

few tracks together, backed by DJ Ill Audia who had been spinning all night in between sets. The whole time, Taboo was right there in the front row, kicking it.



Figure 30: Image taken by author of Def-i on the mic with DJ Ill Audia spinning at the Tumbleroot Brewery on August 18, 2024.



Figure 31: Image taken by author of Def-i and Stuart James on the mic with DJ Ill Audia spinning at the Tumbleroot Brewery on August 18, 2024.

After his set, Def-i brought A\$h back up, this time accompanied by Mato Wahuyi to perform their collaboration track STANKFACE.⁴⁸¹ In front of a now packed crowd, A\$h gave

⁴⁸¹ Mato and Ash got to perform this track at the Phoenix Suns halftime show as well. The music video for the track can be found at: <https://youtu.be/zRoKG7WswTg?si=uPPgf5tgINCF7Hso>.

everything and after the show, Taboo went up to her and said that they should work together sometime.⁴⁸²



Figure 32: Image taken by author of A\$h and Mato on the mic with DJ Ill Audia spinning at the Tumbleroot Brewery on August 18, 2024.

Finally, the headliner came on stage, the Jacob Shije Trio. Pueblo blues guitarist Shije sang out to the crowd both with his voice and his guitar as the night wound down. With that, SWAIA's Santa Fe Indian Market 2024 was officially over. I got in my car and began to make the hour-long drive back to Albuquerque.

Spatially tagging urban environments and activating settler spaces engage in the Sound Back movement by sonically remapping settler geographies. With only a 2.1% Native population out of 90,000 residents in 2024, bringing the sound of 125,000 Natives to Santa Fe over the course of the weekend sonically reclaims Santa Fe.⁴⁸³ Iralu argued that

“American landscape representation contained within colonial cartographies is premised

⁴⁸² Conversation with A\$h on August 19, 2024.

⁴⁸³ Census data retrieved from:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/santafecitynewmexico/PST045224>.

on the systematic genocide of Indigenous peoples.”⁴⁸⁴ Therefore, to flood a settler containment not only enacts spatial justice, as Iralu argues, but also sounds these re/unmappings. Sound Back in this way returns sonic stewardship and builds futures through temporally and spatially calling upon our ancestors through sound.

Bringing Our Ancestors Home: Sampling and Citational Practices

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, sampling through citational practices creates space for intergenerational conversation between ancestors, us today, and future generations. Sampling powwow music, music recorded by us and for us, protests such as Idle No More or NODAPL, conversations with elders, and other forms of Native sound add to this lineage and broader archive. However, there is also the archive that was stolen from us and lives in private collections and museums. This section addresses hip hop that directly takes Sound Back by rematriating these recordings and bringing our ancestors home.

Taking back old field recordings is not new, nor is it specific to hip hop. Kiowa Apache trombone player Quinn Carson, for example, takes old field recordings and uses them for his performances in L.A., weaving in improvisation and a full rhythm section.⁴⁸⁵ Additionally, Wolastoqiyik/Maliseet composer Jeremy Dutcher samples field recordings of Wolastoqey songs. Canadian studies scholar Sabine Kim notes that on their 2018 song “Mehcinut,” Dutcher combines their own voice “with those of Wolastoqiyik speakers retrieved from archival recordings of Wolastoq songs and conversation collected by an

⁴⁸⁴ Iralu 2021, p. 1500

⁴⁸⁵ I was lucky enough to see Quinn’s process when he was a guest lecturer for my world music class over Zoom in 2021 at the University of Chicago.

anthropologist commissioned by a public museum in the first quarter of the twentieth century.”⁴⁸⁶ She goes on to argue that “*Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa* [Dutcher’s 2018 album] is significant as a form of counter-archive that reframes the colonial archive.”⁴⁸⁷ Building towards sonic “repatriation,” Kim contends that “Dutcher’s compositional strategy can be understood as a repatriating act that enables the ancestors’ songs to be brought home to the Wolastoqiyik people.”⁴⁸⁸ While the songs themselves are brought home, I argue that it is still our ancestors themselves that are brought home.

Many more Native artists have taken Sound Back through the sonic stewardship of old field recordings, and I believe that Sound Back can be read to any form of Native music-making that engages in this process. I also understand what Kim refers to as this “counter-archive that reframes the colonial archive” as a different or new space.⁴⁸⁹ However, I argue that taking Sound Back does not create a separate counter-archive. Instead, it places our ancestors back in our own lineages of sound, which have always been archives of knowledge through the passing of knowledge. Bringing them home allows them to have intergenerational conversations once again and build Native sonic futures. While sampling and citational practices are used today by many artists, they have roots in hip hop. Therefore, Native hip hop is a critical space for theorizing Sound Back and the sonic stewardship of Native sound.

⁴⁸⁶ Kim, Sabine. “Reframing Indigenous Sonic Archives.” In Aghoro, Nathalie ed. *The Acoustics of the Social on Page and Screen*. Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 78–99, p. 80.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 80

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 82. Additionally, Stephen Dutcher and Jeremy Dutcher recently published an article on Jeremy’s own music making where they critically call it “rematriation.”

Dutcher, Stephen and Jeremy Dutcher. “Sonic Rematriation: An Interview with Jeremy Dutcher.” *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region / Revue d’histoire de la région atlantique*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2024, pp. 157–179.

⁴⁸⁹ Kim 2021, p. 80

In my introduction, I quoted Recollet regarding the physical spaces where futurity is created, and they also more broadly argue that the activation of spaces by Native bodies remixes settler geographies. They further contend that the “remix activates Indigenous futurities in these creases, in this between time...through the technologies of polychromatic shifting, popping, repetition and looping.”⁴⁹⁰ While breaking attends to shifting, popping, and locking, Native hip hop music attends to the sampling, looping, and remixing required to bring the past forward and hold space for the intergenerational conversations—time travel—that the passing of knowledge requires.

Another example is Inupiaq hip hop artist AKU-MATU (Allison Warden), who has also engaged in Sound Back through the rematriation of settler archival recordings. Native studies scholar Lauren Jessica Amsterdam has documented Warden’s process and explains that

Warden samples field recordings by music collector Laura Boulton, as well as her own recordings of songs from Kaktovik (including her grandparents singing) to make beats. She explains sampling as “when you take [a sound] out of context and put it in some place else.” Through the materiality of hip-hop, Warden resists colonial impositions in space that seek to designate where indigeneity belongs in the settler state (*there* and not *here*), and by inserting her ancestors into the present, pushes back on colonial impositions of time.

Warden explains her decision to sample Inupiaq songs: “Because they’re part of who we are. They are sounds that are unique to us as human beings. They’re something that resonates deeply, that strikes a chord within our soul. . . You know, it’s 10,000 years of innovation and

⁴⁹⁰ Recollet 2016, p. 92

genius to come up with those sounds and songs. It's a way of honoring who we are as people by including what our real voices sound like."⁴⁹¹

Amsterdam argues that sampling archival recordings is a form of "heritage breakbeats," and I further that these heritage breakbeats are part of the Sound Back movement. Sampling Boulton's field recordings not only rematriates them to the Iñupiaq community, but it also provides sonic stewardship of Warden's ancestors and "honor[s] who [they] are as people." Amsterdam speaks of pushing back on colonial impositions of time, and I also see time as functioning within these intergenerational conversations with ancestors and future generations alike. Bringing these recordings home lets them once again be relations and thrive within the community's ecosystem. It lets them renew relations and form kinship with people and all our more/other-than-human relations as well.

In her music, Warden used recordings made by Laura Boulton, who also recorded my ancestors. I, too, went through this process and sampled one of Boulton's recordings to make a track. On it, Ras K'Dee (Black and Pomo), A\$h Da Hunter (Yavapai-Apache), and Def-i all rap a verse, while Kiowa brass player Quinn Carson recorded the horns. The original recording is of a flute player alongside someone playing the hand drum. There is a pulsing three-beat grouping on the hand drum, which can be heard as 3/8, 6/8, 9/8, or 12/8. Listening to the melody, however, 9/8 makes most sense to my ear. The song seemingly has two sections. The first section revolves around G, and the second section revolves around D. With no harmonic instruments, the harmony could be anything, which makes Sound Back such a powerful tool. It lets me have a conversation with my ancestors

⁴⁹¹ Amsterdam, Lauren Jessica. "All the Eagles and the Ravens in the House Say Yeah: (Ab)original Hip- Hop, Heritage, and Love." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2013, pp. 53–72, p. 59.

and figure out the harmony with them as we go. It also lets me play with the time and reconfigure temporal and spatial sensibilities.

The image displays a musical score for two instruments: Flute and Hand Drum. The score is written in 2/8 time, with a tempo marking of quarter note = 100. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score is organized into five systems, each containing a Flute staff and a Hand Drum staff. The Flute part features a melodic line with various note values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The Hand Drum part provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment using eighth notes. The notation includes standard musical symbols such as clefs, key signatures, time signatures, and note heads with stems.

Figure 33: Transcription mine.

Otomí Archive Rec.

Organ

Piano

Bass

Chords: E-9, A-9, Fmaj7#11

Detailed description: This musical score is for a recording from the Otomí Archive. It features four staves. The top staff is a vocal melody in treble clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second staff is for the organ, with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a key signature of one sharp. The third staff is for the piano, also with a grand staff and a key signature of one sharp, featuring complex chordal textures. The fourth staff is for the bass, in bass clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp. Chord symbols E-9, A-9, and Fmaj7#11 are placed above the piano staff.

O.A.R.

Org.

Piano

Bass

Chords: Bbmaj7#11, B7b9#9b13

Detailed description: This musical score is for a recording from O.A.R. It features four staves. The top staff is a vocal melody in treble clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second staff is for the organ, with a grand staff and a key signature of one sharp. The third staff is for the piano, with a grand staff and a key signature of one sharp, featuring complex chordal textures. The fourth staff is for the bass, in bass clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp. Chord symbols Bbmaj7#11 and B7b9#9b13 are placed above the piano staff.

Figure 34: Transcription mine.

The glaring difference is that I changed the time signature from 9/8 to 4/4. For the melody, I chose to start with the first part, centered around G. I have that first phrase repeated twice in full, and then half of the third time. In measure 7 of my track, I draw on the second section, centered around D. Those 8 bars are looped, and the flute goes back to the beginning.

Harmonically, I decided to make the melody go over E minor, instead of G as the melody perhaps suggests. The melody notes of B and G are the 5th and minor 3rd over the E-, and then shift to functioning as the 9 and minor 7th over the A-9. In the third time that is only half of that phrase, the B and G function as the #11 and 9 over the Fmaj7#11. When I finally switch to that second section that centers around D, the D, E, and B function as the major 3rd, #11, and b9 over the Bbmaj7#11. As a jazz musician, not all harmony has to make “sense” from a music theory perspective. In this scenario, however, the b9 over the Bbmaj7#11 chord actually does sound “correct.” As E is already the #11, building pentatonics over any note—including the upper structure notes—roots your ear to a note in the chord. Implying an E minor chord over the Bbmaj7#11 only requires the 5th, the B, to not be part of the chord as G is the 13. Not only does this upper structure chord ground it sonically, but E minor as my key also roots the ear to the B sounding “correct.” Finally, the B7b#9b13 chord has the #9 and root playing over it, the D and B.

As a displaced Otomí Hñähñu person, this process of Sound Back not only brings the recording home, but it also allows me to further connect with my ancestors. Being intimately engaged with the phrases, the melody, the harmony, the time, the flute, and the drum allows me to time-travel and connect with those before me. I can talk to my grandmother again. To her brother, who was an artist in Guanajuato. To my bisabuela,

Mama Chucha. To my bisabuelo and all my ancestors who survived Spanish colonization. I am making music with them.

Conclusion: Toward Sonic Red Futures

In an article titled “Making Kin with Machines,” Lewis, Arista, Pechawis, and Kite explain that

Even conditional acceptance of AI as relations opens several avenues of inquiry. If we accept these beings as kin, perhaps even in some cases as equals, then the next logical step is to include AI in our cultural processes. This presents opportunities for understanding and knowledge sharing that could have profound implications for the future of both species.⁴⁹²

Additionally, media studies scholar Alexander Weheliye balances the human and posthuman through music technology.⁴⁹³ He contends that

By embracing new technologies such as remixing, scratching, and sampling, black popular music producers and performers persistently emphasize... a composite identity, a machine suspended between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines.⁴⁹⁴

While I am not suggesting that samples, loops, beats, and remixes are to be seen as a species, I do argue that the relations and ancestral knowledge that these technologies embody—drums, storytelling practices, dancers, and artists—make hip hop an integral part of Native futurities and a form of kinship on multiple levels. Native hip hop, as a relation, embodies these technologies just as much as the human and more/other-than-human

⁴⁹² Lewis, Jason Edward, et al. “Making Kin with the Machines.” *Journal of Design and Science*, no. 3.5, 2018, pp. 1–18, p. 8.

⁴⁹³ Weheliye, Alexander. “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music.” *Social Text*, no. 71, 2002, pp. 21–47.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 31

networks of kinship. Renewing knowledge and relations requires both a grounding and a vision of what is to come. As Snotty Nose Rez Kids reminds us throughout this dissertation, we are the new ancestors, and what we do today impacts the seven generations after us.

Just like the saying “we are our ancestors' wildest dreams,” the modes in which we transmit knowledge—and perhaps one day make kin with machines—are also out of what our ancestors could have dreamed of. In a different article, digital media theorist and director of the Initiative for Indigenous Futures Jason Edward Lewis asserts that,

postcolonial futures sometimes require us to overclock our imagination, to push our dreaming beyond the extraordinary in order to excavate potential that has been silted over by centuries of settler fantasy. At other times, they require us to slow down, reconsider what is in front of us, and see anew the seeds already planted.⁴⁹⁵

The seeds are already there. Hip hop is the “dreaming beyond the extraordinary” that continues to break down colonial infrastructure and remap settler geographies.⁴⁹⁶ Sound Back at its very core is a call for sonic sovereignty, rematriation of sound, and building of Native sonic futures.

Combining red pedagogy and red futures, Native sonic futures aims to bring the past forward through the relationality of sound, grounded in the lineage of a Native sonic archive. In the music video for “Red Future,” Snotty Nose Rez Kids designed an imagined Native city high above the clouds. This city, however, is tethered or rooted to the Earth below. As such, while there are flying modes of transportation, animals such as whales are also flying through this ecosystem. Grounded in a reimagined Earth, not the colonization of

⁴⁹⁵ Lewis, Jason Edward. “Overclock Our Imagination! Mapping the Indigenous Future Imaginary.” In Igloliorte, Heather and Carla Taunton eds. *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Art Histories in the United States and Canada*. Routledge, New York, NY, 2023, pp. 64–75, pp. 73–74.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 73

another planet, the music video for “Red Future” deploys a Native feminist land ethic and a Native hip hop ecology that exhibit ways of living with all of our kin despite the futurist technology that might exist.

As we slowly become elders, the knowledge that we inhabit will be passed down. We will become teachers. Oglala Lakota education scholar Stephany RunningHawk Johnson and Yakama Native studies scholar Michelle M. Jacob contend that

by connecting deeply with our Indigenous identities and knowledges, we become better ancestors, better teachers, and better learners, more connected to our places and Land, more cognizant of our relationships and responsibilities, stronger in our efforts to promote collective continuance, and champions of Indigenous futurities..⁴⁹⁷

Native hip hop serves as that teacher for the next generation. While many people within hip hop—and perhaps most famously Lupe Fiasco—have said that hip hop has saved their lives, the number of times I heard this statement during my fieldwork put it in a Native context. Def-i, Stuart James, A\$h Da Hunter, Iam Artson, SouFy, and the members of Kozmik Force have all said that hip hop saved them. Despite where they were before that moment, they all are educators in the community now. They all do workshops. They all help build Native futures.

Building a Native sonic future is not just a theoretical lens by which to create science fiction in which Natives still exist in a conceived future. While it can and does encompass these conceptions, it also represents the work of people deeply connected to their relations. Native hip hop bundles hold radical possibilities for the next seven generations through Native sonic stewardship and the Sound Back movement. As the movement continues to

⁴⁹⁷ RunningHawk Johnson, Stephany, and Michelle Jacob. “Educating for Indigenous Futurities: Applying Collective Continuance Theory in Teacher Preparation Education.” *Transmotion*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 176–208, p. 181.

grow on Turtle Island and beyond, Native hip hop holds the knowledge and the access to relations to further build red futures. As Snotty Nose Rez Kids member Young D raps in his verse,

Creator knew the world needed one of you
cuz the future looking bright and real sacred as the youth
Red Future.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁸ Snotty Nose Rez Kids. "Snotty Nose Rez Kids - RED FUTURE (Official Video) ft. Electric Fields." YouTube, February 29, 2024. <https://youtu.be/dehMlAKXNUg?si=6TCAsakd2qilxuVg>.

Conclusion (Grand Exit): Native Hip Hop Joy

As kin, this dissertation has focused on the ways in which Native hip hop builds Black/Native solidarity, passes knowledge through Native hip hop pedagogy, sounds the land through Native hip hop ecologies, and builds futures through Sound Back. This work is critical, and yet it takes energy. It takes time. It necessitates a very slow unraveling of the bundles in order to reworld. Native hip hop often targets the most painful parts of our histories in order to undo intergenerational trauma and the impacts of colonization. Therefore, Native hip hop joy is deeply important.

In 1883, Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller passed what the U.S. government called "The Code of Indian Offenses," which aligned with "kill the Indian, save the man," officially banning all cultural practices within Native communities. On August 11, 1978, President Carter passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), which once again allowed Native communities to practice their culture. A century of surveillance had caused many dances, songs, and other artistic practices like mask-making to become only distant memories for certain elders. As communities began to practice freely and center artistic practices again, they also built many new traditions based on the systemic erasure of their ancestral ones. This is of course not to say that every Nation lost their practices—many found ways to practice while evading surveillance, and many more brought these practices to cities during the Indian Relocation Act.

As many cultural practices were renewed, reintroduced, and expanded due to AIRFA, 1978 was also the year Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were founded. As powwow dancing was becoming a solidified inter/intratribal cultural practice and the powwow circuit was continuing to grow, so too was breaking. 1977 saw the founding of the Rock

Steady Crew by Popmaster Fabel, and breaking was already an integral part of hip hop culture by the early 1980s. It is this very freedom of expression through all of the elements of hip hop—deeply entwined with the history of the "The Code of Indian Offenses" and AIRFA— that allows for the kinds of joy that Native hip hop fosters.

The Ecological Futures of Native Hip Hop's Pedagogies of Joy

In the last decade—but perhaps especially since the murder of George Floyd—Black joy has been a movement. Education scholar Wilson Kwamogi Okello argues that

I am concerned with the otherwise worlds, which is to say, productions of Black Joy that Black people aestheticize while in the crawlspace...I theorize on the belief that traditional logics of inquiry that rely on linguistic practices of articulation cannot wholly consider how confinement always and already structures language and being. Black Joy compels a set of questions attuned to the senses. While Black Joy, perhaps, should best be understood as unspeakable and elasticity of expression, which is to say, incapable of being bounded by linear conceptualizations, I pursue an affective approximation by considering how joy reveals itself in confinement.⁴⁹⁹

Confinement is often connected with respectability politics, and Black education scholar Anna Almore furthers that Black (majority women) educators have often “sacrificed the protection of respectability to pursue joy.”⁵⁰⁰ She continues by contending that “[she] theorize[s] Black educator deviance and caretaking as a way to describe the complex work Black educators do to foster their own survival in an antiBlack world towards liberatory

⁴⁹⁹ Okello, Wilson Kwamogi. “Unspeakable Joy: Anti-Black Constraint, Loopholes of Retreat, and the Practice of Black Joy.” *Urban Education*, vol. 60, no. 11, 2025, pp. 2928–2955, p. 2929.

⁵⁰⁰ Almore, Anna. “‘I Wanna Be Bad’: Black Joy and Deviant Caretaking.” *Urban Education*, vol. 60, no. 11, 2025, pp. 3051–3073, p. 3053

aims.”⁵⁰¹ These crawlspaces, as Okello argues, encompass the early and ongoing curriculum imposed upon Black children. Therefore, Black joy—especially fostered by Black educators not interested in respectability politics—can break those very confinements by drawing on ancestors and future generations alike. This joy, “incapable of being bound by [settler] linear conceptualizations,” is the very thing that makes hip hop pedagogy so powerful.⁵⁰² Knowledge, as the fifth element, is of course about passing ways of knowing and doing, but it is also about passing ways of feeling. The suppression of joy has always been a critical part of colonization.

Native joy, too, has been suppressed through colonization. The stripping of languages, ceremonies, singing, dancing, and other artistic practices was not just meant to “kill the Indian, save the man,” but also to stifle joy, love, and healing. Also in the last five years, there has been discourse around Native joy and love, too, conceived within the larger tapestry of reworlding. This movement did not start with Covid: this is ancestral. However, for example, in 2004 Joy Harjo released an album titled *Native Joy for Real*.⁵⁰³ Just at the start of Covid, Joshua Whitehead published a book called *Love After the End*.⁵⁰⁴ Conversations about Native joy and love have increased exponentially since then. For example, the Indigenous Joy Collective roots itself in the connection between joy and justice, aiding the Urban Native community in Minneapolis-Saint Paul. Especially since the governmental occupation and Natives being targeted by ICE, this work through joy is critical. Not only are love and joy tools to work through intergenerational trauma and the continued impacts of colonization, but much like Black joy, they do not operate within

⁵⁰¹ Ibid, p. 3053

⁵⁰² Okello 2025, p. 2929

⁵⁰³ Harjo, Joy. “Native Joy for Real.” 2004. <https://www.joyharjo.com/music/native-joy-for-real>.

⁵⁰⁴ Whitehead, Joshua ed. *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020.

settler conceptions of linear time. In an article by Naga scholars Elspeth Iralu and Dolly Kikon, they contend that,

Indigenous pedagogies of love are contained not by markers of progress and economic development, but by relations to other beings, water, and land that are sustained over time. While our experiences of relationality can expand and grow, they are not driven by profits, through competition, or accounted for through quantifiable measurements. Instead, our relations are the means through which we navigate the world. One relation leads to us to another. Growth and expansion are always held in tension with current and past relations.⁵⁰⁵

As Iralu and Kikon point out, it is kinship that sustains our pedagogies of love (and joy). The bundles that we are gifted by all our relations teach us about the radical possibilities of joy that can break and un/remap settler containments. While Almore discussed the importance of caretaking and fostering joy, there is also an important parallel to stewardship and what it might look like for both us as humans and our more/other-than-human relations to be stewards of Native joy.

Drawing on this scholarship, I look to the ecological futures of Native hip hop's pedagogies of joy. I have argued that Native hip hop ecology is a land-based hip hop practice that is an extension of the land and continued histories, as well as of the People and how they are relations of the land through the lens of Native feminist land ethics. This definition also encompasses the ecologies of Indigeneity and how networks of kinship construct the infrastructure for futures through coalition-building. I have also theorized that Native hip hop pedagogy is Native hip hop as pedagogy. Native hip hop as kin allows for the teaching and passing of knowledge not as an institution-informed curriculum but as a tool of

⁵⁰⁵ Iralu, Elspeth, and Dolly Kikon. "Indigenous Pedagogies of Love: Theorizing Nonscalable Worlds." *Political Geography*, vol. 114, 2024, pp. 1–8, p. 5.

survivance. Therefore, to receive the responsibility gifted by Native hip hop bundles requires one to not only be attuned to cultural knowledge, but also to Native politics of joy. Native humor is critical to how communities share and pass knowledge, and joy and laughter decentralize the very tools of colonization. Native hip hop pedagogies of joy teach that joy resides in Native hip hop—in all the elements. Native hip hop pedagogies of joy teach and pass knowledge that cyphers are about the ecologies of Indigeneity, and that those inter/intratribal connections and gatherings are what build Native futures. Native joy is radical because it pushes back on the “stoic Native” image of trauma-laden leaders often captured by early anthropologists. By reworlding and remapping the forced containments of settler geographies, Native hip hop joy serves as a rupture, weaving together histories and futures in every Native hip hop bundle that makes settler “quantifiable measurements” unquantifiable.⁵⁰⁶ If early Native schooling was meant to “kill the Indian, save the man,” Native hip hop pedagogies of joy disrupt Western curriculum through community-based and ancestral ways of passing knowledge to “kill the assimilation, uplift the Native.”

From a settler perspective, one cannot colonize joy. Sound is music and Native language. It is also joy and laughter. The material conditions of Natives have been targeted by colonization, and trauma is of course one result of genocide. Despite this violent history, Natives are funny. So many Native Peoples have learnt a new language (English, Spanish, French, etc), and laugh, tell jokes, and share stories with just as much joy as their ancestors. As Blackgirlwoman sociology and criminal justice scholar Barbara Harris Combs states,

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 5

Joy and laughter are my companions on this journey, but the joy I have does not come because everything is alright. Instead, it comes from a radical resolve to choose joy in a world of pain.⁵⁰⁷

This joy is not just resistance. It is radically a form of what Sunaina Keonaona Kale called insistence, “demonstrat[ing] Indigeneity’s density and simultaneity and an unbroken line from our ancestors to our future children.”⁵⁰⁸ It is an ancestral joy—one that time travels between the past and future.

In a haunting music video from 2021 by Inuk artist Tanya Taraq called “Tounges,” she recites

They took our tongues

They tried to take our tongues

We lost our language

And we didn’t

Inuuvunga [I am an Inuk]

We didn’t

Inuuvunga [I am an Inuk]

You can’t take that from us

You can’t take that from us

You can’t take our blood

You can’t take that from us

You can’t have my tongue.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁷ Combs, Barbara Harris. “Finding Black Joy in a World Where We Are Not Safe.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2023, pp. 444–450, p. 449.

⁵⁰⁸ Kale 2024, p. 461

⁵⁰⁹ Tanya Taraq. “Tanya Taraq - Tongues.” *YouTube*. September 28, 2021. https://youtu.be/ziaqLa0uinU?si=M_DE-cRvAE6y4djc.

Taraq plays with the many meanings of tongues, both to say that settlers took her ancestors' tongues (language) and that they can never have her tongue (her ability to speak). As colonization and carcerality continue to surveil and detain Native Peoples through organizations such as ICE, joy remaps these cartographies by representing a rupture and a burst of laughter that escapes through the mouth over our tongues. This rupture cannot be silenced. Our joy cannot be silenced.

In 2017, Jamaican reggae artist Chronixx released a song titled "Black is Beautiful," which says "they never told us Black is beautiful."⁵¹⁰ Building on this song and the history of reggae music more broadly as a site for Black joy, Black/Afro-Caribbean education scholar Michelle Grace-Williams explains that "[her] parents' turntable stereo is part of [her] vivid childhood memory, of hearing Pro-Black narratives, experiencing Black joy, and listening to the song lyrics of Jamaican Reggae artists."⁵¹¹ Native hip hop joy is equally as expansive, whether at cyphers in the desert, community events, or bumping from a homie's car. In a track by Nataanii Means called "Feels Like," he raps,

This make you feel like
a warm reservation night
bologna with the chips in there
tortillas with the spam, that's right
this is what it feels like
your grandmother's hug
and warmth from a fireplace
tell me have you ever loved?

⁵¹⁰ Chronixx. "Black Is Beautiful." *Chronology*. London, UK, 2017. Universal Music.

⁵¹¹ Grace-Williams, Michelle. "'They Never Told Us that Black is Beautiful': Fostering Black Joy and Pro-Blackness Pedagogies in Early Childhood Classrooms." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2022, pp. 357–382, p. 363.

cuz this is what it feels like
we can watch the sky change colors
I never knew I'd love another.⁵¹²

While Native hip hop joy is radical, by equally encompassing the day-to-day (as Nataanii portrays by simply getting gas and buying chips throughout the whole video), it serves as a rupture to the surveillance state by living in the mundane as much as the protests and community actions. As Combs said, “it comes from a radical resolve to choose joy in a world of pain.”⁵¹³ Choosing joy is tapping into the ecologies of Indigeneity and building futures through all our relations. It is listening to Native hip hop as a more/other-than-human kin and engaging with Native hip hop pedagogies of joy, resounding the continued violence of the apocalypse.

The Cypher as Native Joy

During my time at SWAIA 2024, there was an event at the Boxcar in Santa Fe called “Closing Ceremony,” featuring Tia Wood, Nataanii Means, Taos Pueblo rapper B3ar, and Pueblo hip hop trio Macchiato Music, all held down by DJ Element. After a few of the live sets, DJ Element was spinning records when Taboo showed up with famous fancy dancer Notorious Cree.⁵¹⁴ Notorious Cree started as a breaker, which ultimately led him to reconnect with fancy dancing. Supaman, although not at this event, too started out breaking at the same time as he was fancy dancing. This connection between the histories of the two dance

⁵¹² Nataanii Means. “Nataanii Means - Red Dot/Feels Like.” *YouTube*. December 18, 2022. https://youtu.be/oRacBBNi8_M?si=7mjcl2efEvH-iZnG.

⁵¹³ Combs 2023, p. 449

⁵¹⁴ He currently has 1.3 million followers on *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/notoriouscree/?hl=en>.

lineages places Native hip hop practitioners in a specific kind of space that allows for cultural joy to mix with hip hop joy.

As the beat went on, the room formed a cypher and Taboo and the Notorious Cree started to break. After them, Tarahumara producer/breaker Iam Artson and breaker/painter Raven Bright both joined in as well. As everyone danced together to hip hop tracks, people around the circle wore the biggest smiles and chanted “hey” and “oh” as the homies busted a move. Recollet calls cyphers directed toward Native futures

a ceremony to summon future kin... These futurity cyphers choreograph the patterns of net-making to think through kinstillatory practices of convergence. Net-making encodes these sites of rupture and love—revealing how to be in this space together.⁵¹⁵

These ruptures of Native joy and love are what sustain the work of those in this dissertation. As cyphers “choreograph the patterns of net-making,” they bring folks in who are on the periphery, injecting joy and safety through the cypher.⁵¹⁶ These ruptures are what have the potential to break—as in end, but also as in breakbeat and breakdancing—cycles of trauma caused by colonization. Native hip hop joy is the very loop needed to leave the loop of the apocalypse.

Founded in 1994 in Stockton, CA, the Style Elements Crew has many Native members from Iam Artson (who I just mentioned at the Boxcar), Randy Boogie, Pandora, and Remind. In December 2025, they co-hosted the second installment of the Ancestral Cypher with Furious Styles Crew in Arizona.⁵¹⁷ Not only were there Native breakers, fancy dancers, and hoop dancers from across the Southwest, but many Native rappers also joined,

⁵¹⁵ Recollet, Karyn. “Steel Trees, Fish Skins, and Futurity Cyphers.” *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 176, 2018, pp. 26–30, pp. 27–29.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid, p. 29

⁵¹⁷ A recap video can be viewed at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DRwAupkkecA/?hl=en>.

including Def-i. There were also beat boxers, flute players, and hand drummers. Combining all these elements, Native hip hop joy fueled the Ancestral Cypher. In an interview on January 26, 2026, Remind explained that,

What we're doing to our molecular structure as we dance should be studied... This dance goes from entertainment all the way to healing... And we're learning how to touch people, and take away their depression. For that moment they forgot about all their pain... It's about transmutating energy, negative into positive, and even trauma into medicine... It's been doing it for us and that's because it's still healing me.⁵¹⁸

A month later on the Legend Status Podcast, Remind explained that the concept of the cypher was

to have our ancestors dance together. You know what I mean? Like it's not just—whenever I go out, it's all of them are out there with me. So whenever you go out, all of them—and so we acknowledge that in the circle. So whenever someone comes back, now we're hearing your ancestral story.⁵¹⁹

The cypher is a space for communal intergenerational Native hip hop joy, healing through the medicine that Native hip hop as kin passes through its bundles. Once the net is cast, one is pulled into the cypher, choreographing “practices of convergence.”⁵²⁰

Def-i also fosters Native hip hop joy in his own cyphers with his 4 Elements School of Hip Hop Tour, bringing the joy and love required to produce “sites of rupture.”⁵²¹ By “revealing how to be in this space together,” these cyphers not only summon our ancestors

⁵¹⁸ ronnie_ff. “Nothing but gems 💎 with @remind1977 We unpack why breaking is a phenomenon that deserves deeper study.” *Instagram*. January 26, 2026. https://www.instagram.com/reels/DT_EqNwkiJ3/.

⁵¹⁹ legendstatuspod. “When a B-boy steps into the circle, it's not just one person dancing.” *Instagram*. March 10, 2026. <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DVTgsC4ksXO/>.

⁵²⁰ Recolet 2018, p. 29

⁵²¹ Ibid, p. 29

but also our future kin, creating intergenerational dialogues of joy.⁵²² As I have previously shown in chapter two, Def-i hosted the “Hip-Hop Community Cypher and Jam” at Juggernaut Music in Gallup, NM. Just like the Ancestral Cypher, all of hip hop’s elements were present and as each dancer left the center of the cypher, they would tag and bring the next person in with relationality and reciprocity, building kinship through the choreographies of net-making.



Figure 35: Image taken by author from the Hip-Hop Community Cypher and Jam at Juggernaut Music in Gallup, NM on August 23, 2024.

Even at his lyric writing workshops that he does at community events and in classrooms, he creates cyphers that serve as their own ruptures of joy that go against Western-centered curriculum. Def-i was also part of Nataanii Means’ “Medicine Pack: Cypher Series,” where Def-i recorded a verse from his homelands in Shiprock, NM next to his sacred mountains. In his track, he raps “the spirits of ancestors in these verses,” calling upon the strength and joy that our networks of kinship provide us, so that “from intergenerational trauma, we’re

⁵²² Ibid, p. 29

healing daily.”⁵²³ He also runs the annual Gathering of MCs cypher and rap battle in Albuquerque, building community through inter/intratribal expressions of Native joy with MCs and artists from across Turtle Island. In everything he does, Def-i brings so much intention and love to Native hip hop and the communities that he serves, and the cypher serves as his tool of joy.

Finally, drawing on my time in Nuuk and Anchorage, the 2018 Circumpolar Hip Hop Collab featured Native rappers Allison Warden (AKU-MATU), KimOJax, Amoc, YAR1Y, Catty E, Uyarakq, Hildá Länsman, Alexia Galloway-Alainga, Áanna-Katri Helander, and Ailu Valle.⁵²⁴ For the hook of the title track, they all rap in unison, “this is the circumpolar cypher, we share our stories to ignite the fire.”⁵²⁵ Cyphers are of course not unique to Native hip hop specifically, but the ways in which they draw on the resurgence of Native dance and cultural practices make them critical sites of rupture against colonial histories that inject Native hip hop joy.

Hip Hop Improvisational Joy

The blending of hip hop and jazz has so much history, and I was honored to see the Digable Planets live in Santa Fe, one of the pioneers of this sound. Something that I have often thought about is the entwined histories of sonic storytelling between the two, and especially the role of improvisation. As someone who was trained in jazz—both trumpet and composition—storytelling is ingrained in the way I think about improvising.

⁵²³ medicine2society. “Straight out of Shiprock, NM - we met up with @def_i and shot in his hometown on Diné Biseksi (Diné homelands), and in front of the Tsé Bit’a’í. Which has a special place in the Diné creation stories with the Hero Twins Monster Slayer and Child Born For Water, killing a giant bird that was terrorizing the people on it.” *Instagram*. February 27, 2026. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DVRNqP1EZde/?hl=en>.

⁵²⁴ They released a documentary called “We Up: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North,” which can be viewed at: <https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/about-us/stories-and-voices/we-up/>.

⁵²⁵ Ibid

Freestyling within hip hop is of course a direct correlation, but I always gravitated towards the way Ladybug rapped, seemingly stressing certain syllables and improvising within her written lyrics, mixing jazz bebop lines and phrasing with hip hop. She has inspired many MCs, but perhaps most notably within the Native hip hop scene today are Ina from the group Indigenous Cats, and T'simshian and Sugpiaq (Aluutiq) artist Chantil Dukart. As a keys player as well, Chantil tours with Pamyua and also gigs across the Denver area with her own music as well as other projects. I was lucky enough to get to connect and work with her on the hip hop companion to this dissertation. She not only recorded keys on all three tracks, but she also added vocals to "You Can Change Your Mind." I got to ask her about her music making process.

I think that music essentially serves two purposes. One, which is to connect with people's sorrow and make them not feel alone. Then the other side is the joy side, like the Stevie Wonder, transcendental uplifting part. You can't have one without the other because if you forget the joy part, you're missing out. Definitely, when we were working on the track you sent me, I'm actually in a really good head space right now. I've been spending a lot of time self-care and deepening my practice of gratitude. When I went to write on that track, I had just woken up and I was in a really joyful, peaceful state. I think that comes through on the track. I was playing these little bell sounds, and I was just playing whatever came to my mind. I had no preconceived notions. Vocally I felt the same way. I just got immediately in the flow and started writing. The lyrics just came. I actually didn't go back and rerecord almost anything. It was just a very seamless process. I was very joyful the rest of the day because I was so happy with the track that we created...I actually embed improvisational melodies into my lyrics. So like I can say "I was walkin down the **STREET** when out the corner of my eye," or I can say "I was **WALKin** down the street when out the corner of my

EYE” [the changes in font size denotes rise and fall of pitch throughout the phrase]. You know, you can change the inflection and pitch and that’s a way I can be creative, even when I’m repeating the same words or the same verse at multiple shows. I’ve actually added bebop lines into some of my hip hop lyrics, and it also keeps it fresh for me too, and it forces me to be present and really listen to what’s happening around me, just like I would if I were playing keys. And to challenge my musicality. How can I add a little run into my rap that’s a bebop lick? So this kind of hip hop improvisation brings me joy.⁵²⁶

Chantil went on to mention how important humor is to her as a performer, whether that be telling funny stories between songs or being playful in her music. At its core, improvisation thrives when we are full of joy, wonder, and love. Our ears are fully open and we are open to all possibilities. Listening to Native hip hop as a relation decenters the human and expands our understanding of what is being passed. Improvisation necessitates moving away from a predetermined path. It requires us to track the movements of the melodies and the knowledge being shared in order to improvise a way forward. As Chantil said, “this kind of hip hop improvisation brings [her] joy.”⁵²⁷ Native hip hop improvisational joy is Def-i’s freestyles over a breakbeat. It is Rewind’s breaking to a song he has never heard before. It is Cloudface tagging a public space as a DJ spins records. Hip hop improvisation, in its many forms, forces us to connect with those around us and build community. It brings joy and Native hip hop itself as kin can teach about love.

⁵²⁶ Conversation with Chantil Dukart. March 5, 2026.

⁵²⁷ Ibid

Joy After the End

Joshua Whitehead's edited Indigiqueer science fiction anthology *Love After the End* centers Two-Spirit love and a return to ancestral conceptions of intimacy in an imagined interwoven future. The ecological futures of Native hip hop's pedagogies of joy also push towards a return of intimacy. As Bobby Sanchez previously stated,

Over the last 500 years, there's been so much homophobia and transphobia, like in our Indigenous communities...[Trans] Shows like that are definitely dope to be a part of...I definitely love those shows more sometimes than the Indigenous celebrations, where I'm like, only one of or the only one LGBT artist on the lineup.

Native spaces where Bobby does not feel safe are still tied to settler infrastructure. Joy after the end, however, is building a future where Native joy and love can thrive in all its forms after the apocalypse is over. It is imperative that we reworld in order for all our relations to feel safe within our larger network of kinship.

There is an incredible building of global relationships through Native hip hop. Sudanese rapper Hyper249 talks about his life in Sudan, while Palestinian rapper MC Abdul speaks about the genocide in Palestine. The hip hop collective Moro Beats raps in Tagalog and calls out the continued colonial infrastructure that Spain has left in the Philippines. Ina from the group Indigenous Cats is also Filipina, and brings this history and lived experience to her own music in Los Angeles. Chichimeca rapper Native Threat of Kozmik Force and Indigenous Cats recently collaborated on a track called "It Don't Stop," mostly filmed in Chicano Park, drawing on decades of resistance against displacement in Southern California. So many other Native hip hop artists have taken up these calls for actions. They repost new releases and build solidarity through Native hip hop. The Neighborhood

Kids—based in the U.S.—call out these settler infrastructures in “Fed Up” by saying “this is for the kids out in Congo, mining every day for the cobalt” while explicitly saying that the “government be funding all the genocide.”⁵²⁸

This must be the end. Palestine must be free. ICE must be abolished. The genocide must end in Sudan. The M.M.I.W.2S.G. pandemic must be stopped. Extractive industries must find sustainable alternatives. Homophobia and transphobia must be reversed. The prison pipeline must be severed. Black lives must always be protected. These are only fights against settler infrastructure that impacts our human relatives. Many more impact our more/other-than-human kin. This must be the end. And when the apocalypse is over, there will be joy, so much joy. Native hip hop will continue to be kin, and will help us build and rebuild. It will carry our ancestors with us and continue to pass knowledge. As we slowly unravel the bundles and are gifted responsibility into the relational practice of reworlding, the contents of the bundles will reveal themselves to us and we will smile. Our ancestors will hold us in their arms and the warmth will turn into a fire to light our way. We will create a cypher and we will travel from the four sacred directions, gathering to celebrate the end, the joy after the end. We will spin records; we will rap; we will tag; we will break; we will pass knowledge. This will be the beginning after the end.

⁵²⁸ The Neighborhood Kids. “The Neighborhood Kids - FED UP (Official Audio).” *YouTube*. August 15, 2025. https://youtu.be/Xi3X_pY3whE?si=Sgv0XKLcB1_IPihL.

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