

# WORD: Hip-Hop, Language, and Indigeneity in the Americas

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## Abstract

Indigenous hip-hop artists throughout the Americas are currently challenging cultural genocide and contemporary post-racial discourse by utilizing ancestral languages in hip-hop cultural production. While the effects of settler colonialism and white supremacy have been far-reaching genocidal projects throughout the Americas, one primary site of resistance has been language. Artists such as Tall Paul (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe), Tolteka (Mexica), and Los Nin (Quecha), who rap in Ojibwe, Nahuatl, and Kichwa respectively, trouble the pervasive structure of U.S. cultural imperialism that persists throughout the Americas. As a result, Indigenous hip-hop is a medium to engage the process of decolonization by 1) disseminating a conscious pan-indigeneity through lyricism and alliance building, 2) retaining and teaching Indigenous languages in their songs, and 3) implementing a radical orality in their verses that revitalizes both Indigenous oral traditions/storytelling and the early message rap of the 1970s and 1980s.

## Keywords

decolonization, hip-hop, Indigenous language, Indigenous studies, post-racial

## Introduction

When asserting the political importance of Indigenous hip-hop, it is important to begin by thinking about the context for the emergence of hip-hop music and culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the South Bronx. In the 1970s, the United States witnessed a reaction directly against the Civil Rights movements and the gains that it made for racial equality. The election of Richard Nixon was emblematic of this reaction and marked a return to *publicly* privileging white supremacy in the United States, albeit in racially coded terms. As Ian Haney López notes, Nixon appealed to the “great silent majority” in his address in November of 1969 in order to be elected and that appeal was racially coded language that called out to the many white people in the U.S. who felt “displaced” or “silenced” by the Civil Rights movements of the time (2014: 23).

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Also in the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) into law. The purpose of this law was to extend the promises of the Bill of Rights to Indigenous peoples in the United States (Kidwell and Velie, 2005: 72). One year later, however, democratic New York senator Daniel Moynihan proposed a memo to President Nixon that read: “The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of benign neglect” on which Nixon penciled in: “I agree!” Nixon then immediately forwarded the memo to his cabinet (Hodgson, 2000: 157–8) and the result was that the idea of “benign neglect” – the literal abandonment of all issues related to race and inequality – became part of the arsenal in white supremacist policy and practices that formulate part of the underpinnings of colorblind racism. Thus, while on the surface, the signing of ICRA and the move towards “benign neglect” seemed contradictory, they were not. ICRA was mostly symbolic legislation that did not explicitly deal with the issues of anti-Indigenous racism, poverty, or ongoing settler colonialism precisely because of the turn away from, in that political moment, addressing racism in concrete ways and toward a coded racist political strategy that guaranteed elections (Haney López, 2014: 35). At the same time, hip-hop continued to expressly criticize systemic racism as a problem while the mainstream political discourse was silencing it and repurposing it to cement white racial superiority in the U.S. As a result, when hip-hop emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, many young Indigenous peoples tuned-in and related to the expressly political messages about the dire social conditions highlighted in early hip-hop music. Indigenous artists, however, had a unique set of contributions to make to the political messages of hip-hop. In the 1980s, for example, groups like Without Rezervation begin to rhyme about specific settler colonial abuses such as Indigenous genocide, land displacement, and boarding school violence. Indigenous hip-hop, therefore, is born out of and disseminated throughout the Americas because it operates on groundwork laid by early conscious Black and Brown rappers in the U.S. but extends the critique of the sociopolitical contexts of racism, classism, sexism, etc. by specifically responding to American imperialism and settler colonialism as the primary mechanisms for maintaining white supremacy in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in this article, I argue that Indigenous hip-hop artists such as Tall Paul and Tolteka utilize hip-hop as a medium to engage the process of decolonization by: 1) disseminating a conscious pan-indigeneity through their lyricism and calls to alliance building; 2) retaining and teaching Indigenous languages through their songs, and 3) implementing a radical orality in their verses that revitalizes both Indigenous oral traditions/storytelling and the early politicized “message rap” of the 1970s and 1980s.

## **Tribal Transnationalism: Against Post-Racial Discourse**

Anti-colonial Indigenous alliances like those foregrounded in the lyrics of Indigenous hip-hop artists have a long history that points to the necessity for such alliances being formed across local, regional and global contexts in order to effectively challenge settler colonialism and racism because they note that such racist, settler logics and practices are also formed across these contexts. This is the compelling argument made by Shari M. Huhndorf (2009) in which she details the importance of Indigenous language use to underscore how language can defy the colonial erasures of Indigenous peoples. She chronicles how, for example, after European colonization, many Indigenous alliances continued to emerge as oppositional practices to the brutal realities of colonial manipulation like those experienced in boarding schools, Removal, and Allotment policies.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, I also contend Indigenous revolutionary hip-hop practices in the Americas extend these alliances of oppositional consciousness and contribute to the multiple strains of Indigenous cultural production – particularly those that contest ongoing settler colonialism and challenge the current state of post-racial discourse in the U.S. through the use of ancestral languages in music and culture.

Huhndorf also reminds us that Indigenous communities are transnational *within and beyond* the boundaries of the United States. She asserts: “transnationalism ... refers to alliances among tribes and the social structures and practices that transcend their boundaries, as well as processes on a global scale such as colonialism and capitalism” (p. 2). Tribal transnationalism therefore can be conceptualized through the literal and metaphorical border-crossings that Indigenous people make across the United States but also through the global alliances established by Indigenous communities pre- and post-contact throughout the Americas. Such examples include the hip-hop artists above but also the Indigenous communities throughout the world who establish connections with one another such as the Idle No More movement, the Movement for Socialism (MAS) initiated by Evo Morales in Bolivia, the Indigenous university in Venezuela, and the work of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) that all fight for greater Indigenous cultural and political rights in the Americas. These transnational Indigenous border crossings also include forced migrations and cooperation because of the shared histories of stolen land and subsequent allotments whose purpose was to dismantle Indigenous cultures. This means that as Indigenous peoples willingly and forcefully travel from one reservation to the next, from the rez to urban centers and back, or across national borders in the Americas, this transnational migratory process works to strengthen the formation of a pan-Indigenous consciousness present in Indigenous cultural productions like that found in the hip-hop texts I analyze. While the primary alliances I analyze operate within the boundaries of the U.S., they still work to foster a unifying but not universalizing pan-Indigenous consciousness and serve as a constant reminder to colonizing and imperial forces that the various projects of Indigenous genocide have ultimately failed in the Americas.

Therefore, while revolutionary cultural texts like the hip-hop produced by politically conscious Indigenous artists address various historical dominations and racist violence experienced by different Indigenous communities in their local and regional contexts, they also aid in the processual work of decolonization by reinforcing this collective pan-Indigenous consciousness that forms the foundation of transnational movements for Indigenous rights in the Americas. They reveal that the worlds we inhabit are still heavily dominated by settler colonial logics and that racism is an integral component of that framework of domination; and, they remind us that post-racialism is not only illusory but remains a tactic of white supremacy that continues to attempt erasures of Indigenous peoples, our realities, and our cultures. As a result, these hip-hop texts put forward cultural practices of resistance as direct responses to discursive and ideological attempts to maintain white supremacy. Furthermore, these artists remind us that the very notion of post-racialism is a crucial part of a hegemonic structure that benefits from relegating the issues of race and racism to the past by convincing people that racism is no longer in practice today in either *de jure* or *de facto* forms. Additionally, for Indigenous peoples, post-racialism operates to further settler racist logics because it assumes that the practices and effects of colonialism are only historical realities and, thus, Indigenous peoples and their languages and cultures are also relegated to the past. In effect, then, to invoke a post-racial ideology and discourse means that we should no longer oppose white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Since the greatest violence of white supremacy against Indigenous peoples is genocide, post-racialism furthers genocidal logics and practices against Indigenous populations (Smith, 2012: 69).

Specifically, then, for Indigenous peoples, the idea of post-racialism is most troubling because it imagines that genocidal practices are no longer in play across the Americas when in fact they are; this practice is evidenced by continued settler state regulation of the land and culture of Indigenous peoples. Most importantly, post-racialism perpetuates the notion of the “vanishing Indian” by suggesting racial and ethnic difference is insignificant and should not be a central component to understanding individual or group existence. Currently, in the U.S. in particular, we have entered a moment where our courts, government, and public are more comfortable with the language of

colorblindness and post-racialism because those terms erase the usage of terms like settler colonialism and white supremacy, and this framework makes it easier for the settler state to continue many forms of racism and violence. Thus, post-racial ideologies that include colorblindness become logics that ultimately reinforce white supremacy and are part of the ongoing structure of settler colonialism and Indigenous hip-hop, like the “message” hip-hop of the 1970s and 1980s, works to call attention to the problems of settler colonialism and racism for people of color but especially Indigenous people in the U.S. In this way, these Indigenous hip-hop artists and their texts, in explicitly engaging these discourses but also through their linguistic code switching, assert a pan-Indigenous consciousness that is integral to their resistance, to processes of decolonization, and, therefore, to resisting the racist work of post-racial discourses.

## Indigenous Languages and Hip-Hop: Towards a Practice of Decolonization

Many Indigenous artists engage in the processual work of decolonization by utilizing Indigenous languages in their music. However, it is important to note, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have argued, “decolonization is not a metaphor” (p. 1). This means that decolonization must bring about “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 1), and is, thus, necessarily material. Because of this, I am intentional about my argument that the use of ancestral languages in Indigenous hip-hop be considered an act of decolonization. Ultimately, in order to decolonize the Americas ‘land and life’ must be returned. Significantly, ancestral languages are such an integral part of Indigenous life that the revitalization of language produces material effects for Native peoples. In this way, I agree with Tuck and Yang, that the process of decolonization cannot remain relegated to the realm of discourse and metaphor. My understanding of decolonization, consequently, is that it is a process that involves both ideological work – for both the colonized and the colonizer – that Tuck and Yang seem to understand as the process of returning “life” to Indigenous people, *and* material self-determination or returning land and resources to those subject to settler colonialism. Thus, ancestral language acquisition for each generation defies linguistic genocide and maintains life in many ways such as communication with elders and ancestors.

These Indigenous hip-hop productions, therefore, can be considered decolonial art because they raise consciousness about the state of settler colonialism in Indian country – that is, they address the quality of Indigenous “life” noted by Tuck and Yang – and because Indigenous languages are tied to the land, they also make claims to such lands on the part of Indigenous peoples. Linda Tuhiwai Smith shows, for example, that the Maori word for space and time is the same; and, this means that forced use of the colonial language had a direct impact on land displacement (2012: 52). Moreover, because many Indigenous peoples understand the land to be an ancestor, and that ancestors do not speak colonial languages – English, Spanish, French, etc. – it becomes impossible to come to a consciousness with the land unless Indigenous languages are maintained. Leisy Thornton Wyman argues that the transmission and care of Indigenous languages is an issue of what she calls “linguistic survivance” in which Indigenous peoples are not simply ‘speakers’ or ‘nonspeakers’ of their languages but that they may utilize their ancestral languages along with colonial languages to “shape collective identities, practices and knowledge systems in challenging or hostile circumstances” (2012: 14). The significance then for Indigenous hip-hop artists to utilize ancestral languages in this popular form adheres to what Transnational Decolonial Institute scholars now refer to as a decolonial aesthetic that “seeks to recognize and open options for liberating the senses” (2011). Namely, this kind of art activates the political struggle for decolonization (Martineau and Ritskes, 2014: II) that leads to the material elements of decolonization that are integral to the overall process of decolonization.

This Indigenous hip-hop music also challenges other unending violent practices of the U.S. settler state against Indigenous communities in the Americas as these artists act as productive agents for social transformation. These artists trouble what Andrea Smith (2005) has called the “present absence” of Indigenous people in the U.S. In this framework, the forces of white supremacy situate Indigenous people in the colonial imaginary as beyond inferior and into the realm of unbeing as expressed by the trope: ‘the only good Indian is a dead Indian’; and, this trope has reigned over the state of Indigenous existence for the past five hundred years. It is within this context that Indigenous people are portrayed as vanishing and voiceless and this “present absence” attempts to justify continued genocide and conquest (Smith, 2005: 9). Conscious Indigenous hip-hop artists understand that these staggering misrepresentations and their epistemic frameworks, along with their own sonic acts of opposition, work to dismantle the hegemonic frameworks of cultural and material genocide and conquest. This is precisely why the lyrical work established by these artists below offers some of the most discerning explications of the state of Indigenous America at the nexus of the historical, theoretical, and political. Namely, not only to produce one of the most modern forms of music – hip-hop – but to do so in one’s Indigenous language, diminishes the “vanishing Indian” trope and directly challenges the aforementioned vein of post-racialism in current political discourse.

In this article, I focus on a few artists who deploy these aesthetic practices. They resist post-racial discourses that form crucial elements of settler colonialism and racism in the United States by foregrounding issues of racism and code switching to ancestral languages as one part of a multifaceted process of decolonization. These artists include Los Nin, an Indigenous group from Ecuador that raps in both Spanish and Kichwa (their ancestral language spoken during the Inca Empire), but especially Tolteka, an Indigenous Chicano artist from Los Angeles, CA, who raps in English, Spanish and Nahuatl; and, Tall Paul, an Indigenous rapper from the Leech Lake band of Ojibwe in Minnesota who recently released a song in English and Ojibwe (or Anishinaabemowin).

These artists, among other Indigenous artists, are developing a pattern in their lyrical content and songs that represents a refashioned form of the oral tradition where young rappers are themselves learning their Indigenous language for the first time through their musical lyrics; and, this process is also crucial to resisting settler colonial projects given the extent of linguistic and cultural genocide across the Americas.<sup>4</sup> Both Los Nin and Tall Paul, for example, have learned their ancestral language for the first time through their music. These artists are also utilizing language as a means to narrow generational and cultural gaps that colonization has established. For example, Los Nin has a song titled “Identidad” (“Identity”) that specifically challenges the derision of their Indigenous identity. In it, they suggest that boys keep their hair long in order to uphold Kichwa tradition and critique the discrimination they face in the broader society for keeping this practice. Even the name of their group speaks to the power of language: Los Nin draws from the Kichwa verb “nin,” that means: “to say” (Picq, 2012). As a result, their music falls within the tradition of early hip-hop but particularly “message rap” because Los Nin intentionally couple hip-hop and Kichwa to speak to their Indigenous cultural realities while also extending the frameworks of race and class that govern early “message” rap to level broader critiques of settler colonialism and the new post-racial discourses and strategies of racism in the 21st century.

### **Tall Paul: Re-Learning ‘Prayers in a Song’**

A prime example of the powerful use of Indigenous language in hip-hop and its ability to resist post-racial discourses and settler colonial logics comes from Minnesota-based artist Tall Paul. His song “Prayers in a Song” (2011) offers a solid critique of the colonizing histories that have led to the decline of spoken Anishinaabemowin and merits an extended quotation. He raps:

I feel the latent effects of assimilation  
 Inner city Native raised by bright lights, sky scrapers  
 Born with dim prospects, little peace in living  
 As a child, hot headed 'bout the fact I wasn't wild  
 Like they called my ancestors, imagined what it'd be  
 To live nomadic off the land and free  
 Instead I was full of heat like a furnace 'cause I wasn't furnished  
 With the language and traditional ways of my peeps  
 Yeah I used to feel like I wasn't truly Indigenous  
 Now I say miigwech gichi-manidoo  
 For showing me my true roots, definitely Native  
 Take responsibility for being educated  
 My people and customs originating from early phases of history  
 Yeah, it's deeper than frybread  
 And contest pow wows, tears shed in the sweat lodge  
 Prayers go out to all those I've wronged  
 And who have wronged me  
 Gotta treat 'em like family

In this stanza it is evident that Tall Paul is asserting his self-defined Indigenous identity even as the settler state attempts to erase it through the "Inner city," the "bright lights" and "sky scrapers." In noting that he "wasn't furnished with [the] language and traditional ways of [his] peeps," Paul not only suggests that the settler state has attempted a genocide through material means such as land displacement but also attempted a cultural genocide through a form of cultural displacement. He continues by acknowledging that he "used to feel like [he] wasn't truly Indigenous" but now, based on his newly gained knowledge of his Indigenous history and the Ojibwe language, he has learned some of his "true roots" and reasserts his identity as one that is "*definitely* [emphasis added] Native." These verses, then, represent the power of Indigenous hip-hop to literally speak what has been unspeakable for many young Native people – especially when considering the longer history of settler abuse in boarding schools, for example, towards Indigenous peoples speaking their languages.

This ideological decolonizing shift in the first stanza sets up the core of the song and the "hook" in which Tall Paul completely moves from a code switching set of verses from English to Ojibwe to only Ojibwe that seems to mirror the process of decolonization for him and for his art. He raps:

*Gichi-manido wiidookawishin ji-mashkawiziyaan*  
*Mii dash bami'idiziyaan*  
*Miizhishinaam zaagi'iwwewin*  
*Ganoozh ishinaam, bizindaw ishinaam*  
*Mii-wenji nagamoyaan*  
*Nimishomis wiidookawishinaam ji-aabajitooyaang anishinaabe izhitwaawin*

Translated as:

Great Spirit help me to be strong  
 So that I can help myself  
 Show us all love





**Figure 1.** Music video snapshot of “Prayers in a Song” by Tall Paul.

Talk to us, hear us  
 That is why I am singing  
 Grandfather help us to use the Anishinaabe customs

While rapping this hook, the music video for the song displays the Ojibwe text so that it becomes an educational tool for presumably Ojibwe youth (see Figure 1) and therefore works as a tool for decolonization. This practice was intentional as Tall Paul noted in an interview: “I felt using the language was a way to help maintain [the language]. I also thought doing this might draw mainstream attention to Anishinaabe and attract kids as well” (Woodward, 2011). Paul notes that while it is apparent that the lyrics of this song aid him in defining himself, he explicitly says, “I grew up in the city, away from cultural things. I felt I wasn’t a quote-unquote real Indian. I not only struggled to learn the language, I struggled to have a desire to do it. Writing ‘Prayers in a Song’ was a way to help myself resolve all that” (Woodward, 2011). The expressed intention of helping other Native children learn Ojibwe means that Tall Paul links his own struggles with identity in an apparently post-racial society to other children that he knows and imagines are subject to the same cultural erasures.

In reading this song, one must think about the profound theorization made by Frantz Fanon regarding language and colonization in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) in which he states: “To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization” (p. 1).

While Fanon specifically made critiques of the ways the colonizer forced the colonized to speak the colonizer’s language and “bear its weight,” access to and the privileging of one’s own Native language also seems to suggest a subaltern form of resistance in this case. Indeed, it suggests continually imagining an Indigenous world and practicing an Indigenous culture in the face of genocide. Therefore, in this case, language adoption is part of a practice of resistance to the attempted linguistic genocide bound to settler colonialism in the U.S. and part of engraining one’s Indigenous identity.

Moreover, Fanon asserts that a “man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” and that “... there is an extraordinary

power in the possession of a language” (p. 2). Again, in the colonial context, while speaking English, Spanish, or French may very well represent the cultural fractures of colonialism in the Americas, learning to speak one’s Indigenous language also constitutes a powerful act of anticolonial resistance insofar as the “possession of language” helps the speaker and hearer imagine the world “expressed and implied by this language.” Rappers like Tall Paul, as a result, take on the cultural work of language revitalization as a means to understand their own personal identities in the context of the post-racial discourse in the U.S. but also as a means to extend such decolonizing practices to young people across Indian country so that they can collectively re-imagine their own Indigenous world.

## **Tolteka Speaks Volumes: Re-Mapping Indigenous Identity**

The work of Chicano artist Tolteka speaks volumes in this vein of Indigenous hip-hop resistance in the Americas as well. The map included with his album, “Reflexiones en Yangna, Califaztlan,” coupled with Tolteka’s text on top of the map, and the lyrics of his songs, illustrate an oppositional consciousness to the logics of conquest, expansion, “progress” and “development” – all of which are now subtly embedded in post-racial discourses in the U.S. For example, the jacket insert depicts an image of the Official Map of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (see Figure 2) and includes this map along with a “new” Indigenous historical geography as a way to contest the settler expansionist formations of the U.S., and to challenge how such cartographies have been used as instruments of colonial domination.

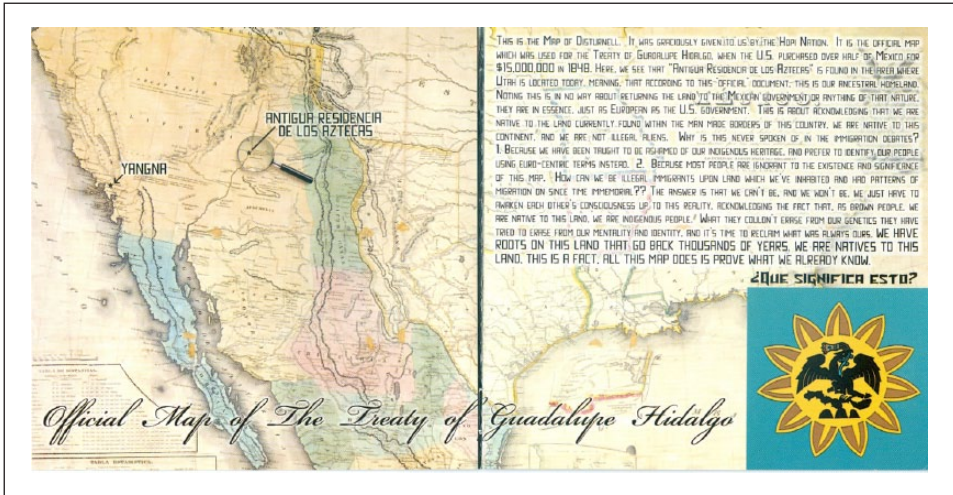
The first part of the text written by Tolteka reads:

This is the Map of Disturnell. It was graciously given to us by the Hopi Nation. It is the official map which was used for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, when the U.S. purchased over half of México for \$15,000,000 in 1848. Here, we see that “Antigua Residencia de los Aztecas” [the ancient home of the Aztecs] is found in the area where Utah is located today, meaning, that according to this official document, this is our ancestral homeland. Noting this is in no way about returning the land to the Mexican government or anything of that nature, [because] they are in essence, just as European as the U.S. government. This is about acknowledging that we are native to the land currently found within the man made borders of this country. We are native to this continent, and we are not illegal aliens. (2008)

This image and text assert a differentiated historical geography of the lands that it purports to name into existence. This re-mapping and the trafficking in this map between Tolteka and the Hopi nation, noted in the narrative that overlays the map of the American southwest and northern México, resists ongoing settler colonialisms by re-inscribing the original relationships to these lands shared between Aztec, Hopi, and Ute peoples. It simultaneously incites a challenge to live with the land and to know the land through an informed, yet not unrealistic nostalgic, historical scope by arguing that such an understanding of these lands should not lead to a return of these lands to México because it operates on similar Eurocolonial logics as the U.S. Therefore, not only does Tolteka, as an Indigenous cultural geographer, disrupt the normalization of white supremacy and settler colonialism but he, in many ways, works to disavow the rhetoric of “Manifest Destiny” that has attempted to complete cultural and literal genocide of Indigenous peoples in the American southwest/Mexican northwest.

In addition, this map and text also point to a transnational trading route across the southwest between the Hopi, the Ute, and the Aztec nations at the very least. Tolteka underscores the map exchange between him and the Hopi nation because while U.S. nationhood establishes borders that lead to cultural genocide that destroy Indigenous cultural practices like language and art, Tolteka uses language to re-assert an Indigenous presence over the American southwest and his art to incite





**Figure 2.** CD jacket insert for Tolteka's album "Reflexiones en Yangna, Califaztlan" (2008).

defiance of the settler states (the U.S. and México) that commit violence against Indigenous peoples. This highlights the necessity to interrogate the ways in which cultural genocide is ongoing and continues to be enacted against Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas.

Moreover, Tolteka dubs the history of "manifest destiny" represented by this map more accurately with the title "manifest insanity" in his song and suggests that the discourses of progress, development, and expansion in the discourse of manifest destiny have all been practices of violence against Indigenous peoples like Chicanos/as and the Hopi people alike. This is not to say that their histories are the same or that they could be conflated. Instead, by employing a transnational framework of conquest and colonization in the Americas, these artists highlight the multiple effects of colonization against distinct populations and the interrelated effects of post-racial discourses that reinscribe divisions between the Hopi as "Americans" who are a part of the dominant U.S. body politic insofar as they fit into white Americans' nostalgic past and Chicanos/as who are categorized as "illegal immigrants" and are imagined as threats who "illegally" cross borders.

Tolteka also raps in Nahuatl to counter the linguistic genocidal effects of colonization much in the same way Tall Paul raps in Ojibwe. When I interviewed Tolteka in 2011, I asked him about the genealogy of conscious rap and how Indigenous rappers fit into that family. He responded by saying, "Indigenous communities have been producing rhythmic poetry for longer than my ancestral memory can currently remember, but probably, forever" (interview by author, Los Angeles, California). He was also very mindful about following up this statement with an acknowledgement of the driving force of conscious hip-hop that he identified as part of "the African poetic tradition ... from signifyin' and toastin' back to the griots" (2011). His insistence on the Indigenous poetic tradition, therefore, is an important genealogy for his own personal Indigenous practice of hip-hop, rather than a disavowal of the centrality of blackness in hip-hop music and culture. This is significant because Tolteka is recognizing that the spirit of resistance in Indigenous hip-hop, as I note in the introduction, stems from the earlier tradition of speaking truth to power in predominantly African American and Puerto Rican hip-hop expression in the Bronx, New York, in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Moreover, in this same interview Tolteka asserted: "we gotta share Indigenous consciousness in the music" (2011) in order to challenge materialism and capitalist societies and that his primary

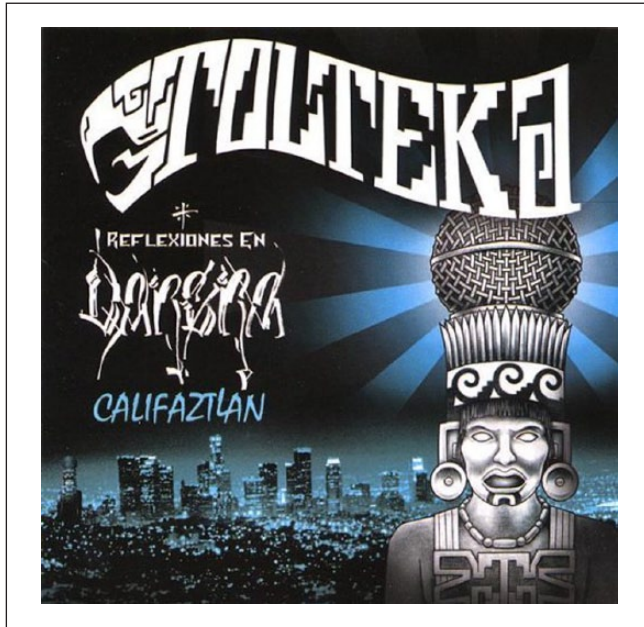
means to engage in this cultural labor is to rap in Nahuatl. In one verse of his song “Decimas” (2008) he makes a strong call to action by rapping the phrase: “Mexica Tiahui,” that translates to: “Mexicas/Mexicanos/Chicanos move forward.” By invoking this call through Nahuatl, Tolteka marks Indigeneity as a central axis to empowerment for Mexicas/Chicanos to move forward within the context of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. This invocation also suggests that Indigeneity cannot be relegated to a past that reinforces histories of conquest and domination. In this way, the U.S. national borders that seemingly subsume racial difference in national identity and thus express a post-racialism are challenged by Tolteka’s own Indigenous knowledge and cartographic reading of the Disturnell map above.

Furthermore, in the song “Decimas” Tolteka uses Nahuatl to frame what he consistently calls “Indigenous brilliance” (2011) – a term that privileges Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as the knowledge base for understanding sustainable relationships with local/natural resources, and its related Indigenous epistemologies as the foundations for distinct Indigenous perspectives in philosophy, spirituality, culture and community. This framing then leads to the transnational Indigenous understanding of the Americas through language – specifically Nahuatl. He raps: “*Si no sabian,/ La lengua es Nahuatl/ Una de las [sic] idiomas mas avanzadas/ Sagradas/ Que se habla de Aztlán/ Donde yo nací/ Hasta Nicaragua*” (2008). It is translated as: “If you didn’t know/ the language is Nahuatl/ one of the most advanced languages/ sacred/ that is spoken from Aztlán/ where I was born/ all the way to Nicaragua.” In this way, he does not necessarily rely on understanding race and culture, or racial formations in the Americas as a product of U.S. imperial power and discourse; instead, he implies there is no need for a racial center when the sacredness of Indigenous cultural practices of language retention helps transcend national divisions.

Similarly, Michelle A. McKinley (2012) has argued with regard to the theorization of *mestizaje* that “the problem ... is that the comparative debate continues to rely on the U.S. model of universal racial formation, rendering other ways of ‘doing race’ as variations on a theme” (p. 119). Yet, as Tolteka invokes indigeneity across multiple national contexts in his music, it is implied that the US nation-state model does not solely define racial/cultural identity although it also cannot be unmoored from the realities of colonization, genocide, and domination in American imperialism. The other blatant implication is that race is not irrelevant in these histories. In fact, in the 21st century race is more prominent than ever, it just operates differently (Delgado, 2012: 163). Colorblindness is now the American nationalist project, and these Indigenous hip-hop artists unveil the anti-Indigenous racism in such a project.

Furthermore, these Indigenous artists like Tolteka lay claim to urban space in this music along with their Indigenous identities in order to disrupt past/present and rural/urban dichotomies. This is significant because post-racial discourse has ascribed Indigeneity to the past and the rural/reservation: meaning within the parameters of post-racial ideals, Indigenous people do not exist and, even if they are granted some level of existence, it is outside the bounds of modernity. Specifically, then, post-racial discourse has implied that not only are we beyond race, but we are particularly beyond any moment where racial pride and identity should matter. Thus, when Indigenous artists like Tolteka and Tall Paul overtly assert their presence, and do so in urban contexts, they suggest not only that race/ethnicity most certainly matters, but also that it cannot be relegated to a past and outside of the symbols of modernity and futurity: the urban center. Tolteka’s album cover for “Reflexiones en Yangna, Califaztlan,” (2008), for example, challenges these very dichotomies (see Figure 3).

In this image the skyline of downtown Los Angeles, California, is the backdrop for the Mexica imagery presented with both the eagle head, from which Tolteka’s name emerges, and crowned with a microphone – suggesting that modern technology will be the unexpected avenue through which Indigenous knowledge is disseminated. In these ways, this image cannot easily be confined



**Figure 3.** CD jacket cover for Tolteka’s album “Reflexiones en Yangna, Califaztlan” (2008).

to the past, nor can it be confined to a non-urban space. Most importantly, this image also suggests that indigeneity cannot be rendered invisible in the face of modernity, even though post-racial discourse and ideals continue to attempt to solidify such erasures.

### **Conclusion: Indigenous Hip-Hop Defies Post-Racialism**

Overall, then, Indigenous hip-hop music acts as a discursive political disruption in similar ways as what Afrodiasporic scholar Paul Gilroy suggests in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) when he argues that “[music] can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness” (p. 74). It also exemplifies Gilroy’s argument that music becomes expressly political when it speaks the unspeakable and breaks down the domination asserted in the “topos of unsayability” (p. 74) in which he notes that in certain contexts, music becomes one of the *only* ways to speak because the mainstream historical, social and political discourses are deeply rooted in oppressive structures. He notes that the critiques of modernity articulated by black intellectuals “had their rhizomorphic systems of propagation anchored in the continued proximity to unspeakable terrors of the slave experience” (pp. 72–3) and that music is/was one of the communicative ways African Americans begin to “emerge from the plantation” (p. 75). In similar ways, then, I argue that Indigenous peoples in the United States “emerge from the [boarding schools]” and other sites of cultural genocide and articulate their resistances through music and art – in particular through hip-hop music precisely because of the legacies to which Gilroy points.

Moreover, in *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (2009) Alim et al. argue that language is one of the most significant ways to read and understand hip-hop culture and, yet, they say they are “not interested in a linguistics that narrowly presents speech as dislocated from the lives of its speakers” (p. 5). I agree that language and

linguistic study should not be taken out of its context/speaker, and I make a parallel argument above regarding Indigenous hip-hop and language: In part, I attribute political significance to the use of Indigenous languages in hip-hop because of the historical and lived experience of the speakers; this is because for Indigenous peoples to speak their ancestral language in the colonial context, particularly in light of punishments that were so severe for speaking ancestral languages, there remains a deeply rooted feeling of terror related to language maintenance for Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Thus, for Indigenous artists to express their existence and challenge continued colonization, it has been necessary for them to find attendant modalities of expression – in this case hip-hop music – that could be coupled with a practice and revival of their ancestral languages and identities. In these ways, these Indigenous artists are speaking the unspeakable – especially in the new context of post-racial America – and exploring the topos of the “unsayable.” This music also offers them avenues for both their political expression, given the history of hip-hop, and the means to cultural and linguistic retention in the face of cultural violence.

This is not to say there are no limits on the possibilities of cultural resistance within Indigenous hip-hop. Even conscious hip-hop can be tied to the capitalist market and then regulated by the settler state as a commodity, meaning commodities and resistive art are often linked in some ways. However, it is also the case that hip-hop produced in Indigenous languages is less likely to be tied to the capitalist market in the same ways as other forms of hip-hop because this music interrupts commodity capitalism by circulating through informal economies and through local communities oftentimes for the expressed purposes of language and cultural transmission rather than for profit. Still, it must be recognized that the settler state may even attempt to appropriate these Indigenous cultural productions despite such resistances.

That said, I frame the aforementioned examples of Indigenous hip-hop within this conversation about the “unspeakable” because it may only be the arts (visual and spoken) that awaken our collective conscious and cause us to rise up against these new forms of “post-racial” domination across the Americas. It has been well documented that the redesign of racism in this historical moment is institutional and structural, not necessarily personal and explicit. Scholars such as Michelle Alexander (2010) and Gary Delgado (2012) have shown that the law has been a historically powerful site from which to maintain a system of colorblind racism. Consequently, since legal frameworks do not create a space to challenge settler colonial and racist systems, and while music alone cannot be the singular decolonial act that works to repatriate land back to Indigenous peoples, both are left to be part of a process of coming to consciousness that furthers the processes of decolonization.

Furthermore, the transnational circuits that are being established by these musical artists also grant radical popular potential to the effects of this music. Many of these rappers travel across Latin America and the United States and even Europe with their revolutionary messages embedded in their Indigenous languages. As Diana Negrín da Silva has asserted (2012), this is one way Indigenous peoples are re-territorializing their racial/ethnic identities: through the establishment of worldwide Indigenous social networks; and, this networking, in and of itself, is becoming an effective form of launching activism that challenges racism in the 21st century.

Overall, then, it is crucial to note that Indigenous language retention can further the efforts of decolonization because most Indigenous languages do not follow a Western paradigm. Namely, it is possible to think of Indigenous language retention as aiding in the process of decolonization because these languages often operate against dichotomous/binary thinking and thus model Indigenous epistemological and educational paradigms. Moreover, language retention asserts a collective imagination over an individual one. Language is communal, yet in the context of the U.S. settler state the English language has been used to defy community and linguistic diversity. The use and deployment of Indigenous languages is usually against the state, not with support from the state, and as a result,



works to aid in the process of undoing linguistic and cultural genocide. For example, regarding the aforementioned music of Los Nin using Kichwa in hip-hop, Manuela Picq (2012) asserts, "It's not only that indigenous hip-hop represents the cosmopolitan, pop face of ancestral cultures. It is that hip-hop has become a tool to sing other worlds into existence." In this way, the use of Indigenous languages in hip-hop is inherently political. It is as Martineau and Ritskes have recently argued by saying Indigenous art "creat[es] new radical subjectivities premised on Indigenous survival and re-emergence, similar to the process undertaken by other communities engaged in decolonial struggle" (2014: II). Thus, the maintenance and retention of Indigenous language through hip-hop is not simply an aesthetic choice but an issue of survivance and active resistance.

The musical texts I have underscored show how Indigenous revolutionary hip-hop productions not only chronicle the missing history and/or actual history of Indigenous peoples, but they produce self-representations comprised of personal narrative, lived experience, Indigenous social thought, politics and community that challenge post-racialism and ongoing settler colonialism. The multivalent constructions of these songs communicate a self-defining and self-possessing standpoint that unearths the past, contextualizes the present, and imagines a future for Indigenous peoples not determined by white supremacist and settler state ideals. In doing this these cultural and sonic productions use lyrical content and alliance building across multiple national borders in the Americas to disseminate a conscious pan-indigeneity. Additionally, these artists overtly challenge cultural genocide by retaining and teaching Indigenous languages in their hip-hop musical formations. While colonization has ensured the unlikely chance of Indigenous youth learning their languages, these artists defy those odds and are contributing to the maintenance and integrity of their traditional cultures through a non-traditional medium. Finally, by using hip-hop to conduct this work, these young artists implement a radical orality that brings together their Indigenous oral traditions with the old school hip-hop of the 1970s and 1980s that was grounded in a social and political message ultimately creating new forms of storytelling altogether and remaking how cultural labor can effectively work toward decolonization.

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## Notes

1. Indigenous hip-hop in Latin America is a bit more difficult to trace because many of the Indigenous artists are Afro-Indigenous and often situated themselves within the vein of black popular culture. Today it has become evident that the genre of Indigenous hip-hop in the Americas is only on the rise. For example, as I state elsewhere, "at this moment, we are witnessing an incredible rise of Native hip-hop. The Aboriginal People's Choice Music Awards for 2013 recently highlighted the importance and popularity of many innovative rap artists and groups. Rellik's 'Idle No More' won Best Music Video, the album *Redwinter* by Drezus won Best Rap/Hip-Hop CD and Lightning Cloud took home the Best New Artist award. And, of course, one can hardly invoke Native hip-hop in 2015 without pointing to A Tribe Called Red who took home Best Group, Best Album Cover (for their album *Nation II Nation*), and Best Producer for 2013" (Navarro, 2014: 103).
2. However, it is crucial to note that I break with Huhndorf in part because of her theoretical framing. As Scott Lauria Morgensen has noted in a recent book review of *Mapping the Americas*, Huhndorf fails to center an Indigenous feminist approach to Indigenous Transnational Studies. While she accounts for some of the scholarship produced by Indigenous feminists, this framing is not a central axis. Additionally, Huhndorf understands American Studies as the best disciplinary home to make these interventions, which seems a bit rigid since American Studies as a discipline has yet to fully frame itself within the plurality of *Las Américas*.

3. I intentionally refer to white supremacy as a *practice* because, while racism is a belief that white people are superior to people of color, it has also structurally been implemented, or put into practice, through the law by the courts and American society at large. Additionally, the logics of settler colonialism and racism, along with the practices of white supremacy, are plural: there is no singular all-encompassing logic of white supremacy and/or settler colonialism – they take on multiple forms. This means they also affect various communities distinctively, yet remain interrelated (Smith, 2012: 67).
4. Significantly, many Indigenous languages of the Americas have been rendered extinct through colonization. In 1998, linguist Michael Krauss chronicled, “of about 210 indigenous languages still extant in the USA and Canada, 34 are spoken by speakers of all generations, 35 are spoken by the parental generation and up, 84 are spoken by the grandparental generation and up, and 57 are spoken by a few aged speakers” (p. 9). Krauss also showed that there was greater language retention in the areas of New Mexico and Arizona, but even these are declining and in need of focused retention. A decade later, in 2008, the Boarding School Healing Project reported, “Native languages are threatened with extinction. There are about 155 Indigenous languages still spoken in the United States, and it is estimated that 90% will be extinct in ten years, leaving about twenty languages by 2050. By that point, those twenty will be on the verge of extinction as well” (p. 22).

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