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Kyle T. Mays

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# Decolonial Hip Hop: Indigenous Hip Hop and the disruption of settler colonialism

Kyle T. Mays

Department of African American Studies and the American Indian Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary Detroit has gone through many changes – or so it appears. From streets lined with vehicles made by Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors and driven by the nearly 2 million people who called the city home in 1950 to certain parts of the city looking like ghost towns; from a population that dwindled to 670,000 to the revival of downtown. Yet, what has been remarkably consistent is the invisibility of the Motor City's Indigenous population. Indeed, Indigenous erasure, combined with rhetoric and policies that continue to marginalize and subjugate African Americans in Detroit, create a place rooted in multiple colonialisms. This essay examines how Detroit's Indigenous Hip Hop artists resist settler colonialism through art, creativity, and culture as well as the practices of Detroit 2.0, a rhetoric and policy used by Detroit elites to reimagine it as a place of opportunity. By making visible the connections between blackness and indigeneity, as well as by linking the struggle of colonized peoples in Detroit to those in Palestine, Indigenous artists are not only asserting their humanity and challenging the longstanding idea of their erasure, but also constructing pathways for artists and activists to disrupt the effects of multiple colonialisms that continue to marginalize people of colour in urban areas. Detroit's Indigenous Hip Hop artists make socially conscious music and also participate as activists in the city of Detroit. They serve as a window onto contemporary Indigenous identity, represent an exemplar of the urban Indigenous experience, and combine activism with art in a variety of ways.

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous studies; Hip Hop; Palestine; Detroit; colonialism; urban studies

## Introduction

Hip Hop continues to be one of the most important global, cultural movements over the last thirty years (Chang 2007). Although Hip Hop exists within a global capitalist framework and is a part of the global hegemony of US export culture, it continues to serve as a mode of resistance for oppressed people within and beyond the borders of the United States; this includes Indigenous peoples within the US settler nation-state.

**CONTACT** Kyle T. Mays  [mayskyle@ucla.edu](mailto:mayskyle@ucla.edu)

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Indigenous Hip Hop, I argue, provides a central site for unpacking ideas of authenticity, contemporary Indigenous identity, links between indigeneity and US blackness, and the urban Indigenous experience. But what is Indigenous Hip Hop? Indigenous Hip Hop is a culture first adopted and then produced by Native people to challenge settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy, among other things. One of the major goals of Indigenous Hip Hop is to assert the sovereign rights of Indigenous people, and to assert their humanity as modern subjects. And Native Hip Hop takes on many flavours throughout the Indigenous world(s). Indeed, some examples sound like what one can hear on the radio; others might include Native 'sounds,' and powwow music. Indigenous Hip Hop is not just Native people performing the culture of Hip Hop; it is an anthem, a voice, a literary and decolonial movement. It is what decolonial theorist Frantz Fanon calls 'combat literature.' He writes that combat literature 'calls upon a whole people to join the word, in the struggle for the existence of the nation. Combat literature, because it informs the national consciousness, gives it shape and contours, and opens up new, unlimited horizons' (Fanon 2004, p. 173).

Furthermore, Indigenous Hip Hop is an example of a global Indigenous cultural revolution. Anishinaabe international relations scholar Sheryl Lightfoot (2016, p. 202) argues that the current movement for Global Indigenous politics, 'seeks the peaceful accommodation of Indigenous nationhood, with or without state structures, on a trajectory that inevitably leads toward more pluralistic conceptions of sovereignty and territoriality.' Similarly, what we might call 'Global Indigenous Hip Hop,'

forces a rethinking of relationships between Indigenous peoples and states away from hierarchical, colonial relations and toward a new, fair, and just relationship that allows Indigenous peoples to freely determine their political status with, within, or across the borders of nation-states. (ibid, p. 203)

The connections between settler colonial logics in Detroit and Palestine allow for Hip Hop in these spaces to serve as a decolonial art form, or at least a combative component to the settler colonial present.

It might seem difficult to understand why I am bringing into conversation settler colonialism, an Anishinaabe artist (Sacramento Knoxx), and a Palestinian artist (Sharif Zakot). It begins with the assumption that multiple forms of colonialism exist, and often across borders. As the editors describe in the introduction, 'by multiple colonialisms, we indicate first of all, that we live in a colonial present and that this present is marked by multiple and varied articulations, times, and spaces of coexisting and converging colonialisms' (Da Costa and Da Costa, this issue). These artists consider each other 'Indigenous,' not bound by myopic notions of the term and beyond the settler state. In Canada, First Nations have demonstrated some connection with Palestinians, illustrating that what it means to be Indigenous is not simply a tie to land; but

it is also a shared sense of solidarity in resisting settler colonialism. As Krebs and Olwan (2012, p. 142) contend,

to be indigenous ... is to stand in solidarity with other indigenous peoples. It is to resist their occupations and the conditions of injustice to which they are subjected. It is to recognise, understand, and resist settler colonialism in its various manifestations and to make historical links between its interconnected racial logics. It is to refuse to support, enable, or sanction settler colonialisms in any context.

In addition to land theft, for Indigenous peoples in Palestine and Detroit it is about the control of land and bodies, confining Indigenous peoples to reservations and also the use of checkpoints and permits, which controls how and if Palestinian bodies are able to travel (Krebs and Olwan 2012). These groups are connected not only politically, but also through their resistance to colonialism.

In addition to framing Indigenous Hip Hop as an example of resistance to colonialism, it is important to juxtapose transnational Indigenous cultures of resistance. As literary scholar Chadwick Allen (2012, p. xiv) writes, the purpose of juxtaposing global Indigenous literatures, or in this case, Hip Hop, is not just to demonstrate their similarities, but serves as a method that invites, 'specific studies into different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts.' Furthermore, Indigenous juxtapositions 'place diverse texts close together across genre and media, aesthetic systems and worldviews, technologies and practices, tribes and nations, the Indigenous settler binary, and historical periods and geographical regions' (ibid, p. xviii). It is my desire, just like the artists in this essay, that readers begin to see how the logics of settler colonialism operate in similar manners, even in two places miles away, and that colonized subjects utilize Hip Hop not just as a mode of resistance, but as an artistic practice rooted in the larger struggle for decolonization and radical, transformative politics. While my aim is not to compare the settler colonial situations of Detroit and Palestine – even as I do so somewhat – it is to juxtapose two Indigenous artists and their expressive cultures, in order to see how they construct Indigenous solidarity through culture, as a resistance to the settler colonial project.

## **Detroit**

Detroit has gone through many changes. From the streets being lined with the vehicles of Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors, driven by the nearly 2 million people who called the city home in 1950 to certain parts of the city looking like a ghost town, from a population that has dwindled to 670,000 to the revival of downtown, just about everything is changing in the City –

so it appears. What has been remarkably consistent about current changes in the Motor City is how invisible the city's Indigenous population's history and current reality remain. Indeed, the dual processes of Indigenous erasure and the rhetoric and policies that continue to marginalize African Americans in Detroit create a tension of continued (Indigenous) erasure and Black subjugation. In this way, Detroit is a place rooted in multiple colonialisms. From the time Cadillac landed and claimed the land of present-day Detroit for France to the present, settler colonialism and anti-blackness have been central to Detroit's manifestation as a (re)developing city.

Still, Detroit is 'the place to be,' at least according to current discourse. The former 'arsenal of democracy' now extraordinary example of urban blight is newly constructed as a place of opportunity for wealthy, white venture capitalists to be capitalized upon. When former Emergency Financial Manager Kevyn Orr declared bankruptcy for the city of Detroit in July 2013,<sup>1</sup> he stripped this power from the city council and set the stage for a political and economic takeover of the city (Bomey 2014). Those who insisted that a takeover was necessary, however – especially after the magnificent downfall of the 'Hip Hop Mayor,' Kwame Kilpatrick – have missed the point (Yaccino 2013). Simply categorizing Detroit's woes as an example of Black political corruption ignores a host of other issues, which I outline below. Nevertheless, Detroit has become a place for white saviours to come in and, well, save. In other words, Detroit is now a place ripe for (re)settlement.

As a site of settlement, Detroit dates back to 1701 when the Frenchmen Antoine Laumet de la Mothe, sieur de Cadillac, 'founded' the city. This founding began the dispossession of Anishinaabeg in the area, although it was not an inevitable event. For instance, in the Odawa war chief Pontiac staged an attempt to take over British forts throughout the Midwest. In May 1763, Pontiac and hundreds of warriors attempted to take over Fort Detroit. While they were able to take over other forts, their attempt in Detroit ended in a stalemate. Cadillac, like other European settlers, planted the French flag. As literary scholar Anne McClintock (1995, p. 26) argues, 'imperial men reinvent a moment of pure (male) origin and mark it visibly with one of Europe's fetishes: a flag, a name on a map, a stone, or later perhaps, a monument.' Cadillac's arrival is key to the narrative of the beginning of the city of Detroit's development – a white man founded the city and now it has begun. That history is misleading, however. In fact, Cadillac beckoned local Indigenous nations to live around his settlement and protect it from the British and Haudenosaunee then encroaching on the French fur trade (Tanner 1974).

Today, settlers are not planting flags, they are buying up buildings, taking over vacant lots, rebranding neighbourhoods, and using media to construct Detroit as, once again, a vacant space in need of settlement (Opportunity Detroit). In 2014, advertisements appeared in Brooklyn (NY) that encouraged people to come to Detroit with the phrase, 'Detroit: Just West of Bushwick,'

accompanied by a cropped photo of Diego Rivera's infamous painting *Detroit Industry Mural North* from the Detroit Institute of Arts. In 2015, even *Business Insider* news website published a short essay titled, 'New York Hipsters are being encouraged to move to Detroit,' which documented a few business owners who were moving to Detroit to open businesses because the city was on the rise and land was cheap (Willett 2015).

Encouraging young hipsters to move from New York to Detroit is a symptom of what people like billionaire Detroiters, owner of the National Basketball Association franchise Cleveland Cavaliers and Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert calls 'Detroit 2.0.' This term is the localized articulation of Richard Florida's idea of the 'creative class,' where young (white?) entrepreneurs and artists revitalize a city through creativity in the arts and business (Florida 2002). 'You can do anything in Detroit. It is cheap, it has a great history, and it is not too big of a place.' This rhetoric harkens back to nineteenth century pioneer rhetoric that drew settlers west for a new life. Detroit 2.0 ignores the fact that Detroit is one of the biggest and blackest (80 percent) cities in the United States. Rather, it calls on a white saviour complex, or more precisely, the 'white man's burden' narrative. As William Easterly (2006) explains, the white man's burden shapes how planners around the world who want to help underdeveloped countries produce grandiose ideas about ending poverty, for instance, but do not look at the specifics of a particular country or try to understand its history, culture, and politics, nor to understand how that country became underdeveloped in the first place. Central to the idea of the white man's burden is an understanding that the native population is incapable of being civil and cannot develop space or use resources in a 'proper' (Eurocentric) manner. This narrative allows white settlers to occupy land, extract resources, commit genocide, and segregate people of colour, all while holding whiteness as the epitome of modernity.

People like Dan Gilbert make Detroit a place of opportunity. He and the legions of young white people he hopes will come to Detroit want to save the city from the (Black?) people who have ruined it; they want to make Detroit 'great again.' Thus far, he has been successful. In 2014–2015, about 8,000 white people moved to Detroit. Many of them were artists and entrepreneurs, and they have begun reshaping the landscape, social makeup, and culture of the city. 8,000 is a staggering number – the largest number of white people who have moved to the city since the 1950s – especially considering that the city's population has declined dramatically according to the US Census, and these settlers take a variety of jobs, from the tech industry to restaurants, bars, and coffee shops (Opportunity Detroit).

While in the past Detroit was known for cars and factories, no particular industry now dominates. Instead, it is seen as a place of opportunity and reinvention. Just visit the Opportunity Detroit website and look at the partners –

firms like Detroit Venture Partners will gladly assist young entrepreneurs looking for venture capital and start-up funds (Opportunity Detroit). And, again, Dan Gilbert is involved. In Detroit, anything is possible, and instead of a flag to cement one's claim, you simply need a business backed by a venture capital firm. Amidst these changes, however, people are resisting in many ways, including through arts and activism.

Groups like New Era Detroit are trying to end violence in the city and challenge gentrification. Another group, Art Change US, held a meeting in Detroit in October 2016 (Art Change US 2016). This organization hosts multiday meetings in cities all across the country, bringing together a collection of artists, activists, and scholars to discuss how the arts can change social oppression. In addition, Native Americans of Detroit, the city's doubly invisible population, not only remain but also continue to resist. Some use Hip Hop in a creative culture of resistance to assert that Indigenous people will decolonize the space by any means necessary. Thus, Hip Hop has become a means for Indigenous people to reclaim the city as an Indigenous space. Artists like Sacramento Knoxx reclaim space by holding community jam sessions for Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth in Clark Park on Detroit's southwest side (in Mexican Town). Such creative practices provide new potential for reclamation and a challenge to both colonialisms that are currently operating within the city – the gentrification of Black Americans and the continued dispossession of Indigenous people, who, despite their lack of presence in archives, popular media, and current discourse, remain within the city.

The politics of resistance among Detroit's Indigenous population is not only a response to gentrification but more precisely a challenge to settler colonialism, through art, creativity, and culture. Native people in the Motor City are also making visible longstanding issues facing urban Indigenous people, and they are doing so using a Black art form. In particular the work of Sacramento Knoxx brings to light issues facing Detroit's Indigenous community (and beyond) as well as connects Detroit's struggle to those faced by the Palestinian people. He makes socially conscious music and also participates as an activist in the city. He opens a window on contemporary Indigenous identity as an exemplar of the urban Indigenous experience, combining activism with art in a variety of ways. Indigenous artists like Knoxx are using Hip Hop to challenge the rhetoric and practice of Detroit 2.0. By making visible the connections between blackness and indigeneity, as well as by linking the struggle of colonized peoples in Detroit to those in Palestine, Indigenous artists not only assert their humanity and challenge their longstanding erasure, but also construct pathways for artists and activists to disrupt the effects of the multiple colonialisms that continue to marginalize people of colour in urban areas.

## Detroit, erasure, and multiple colonialisms

The construction of modern Detroit history goes back to the late nineteenth century. The city's history is fundamentally rooted in Indigenous erasure. Historians like Clarence Burton, whose collection at the Detroit Public Library has been the basis for many studies of Detroit, constructed a history that focused on the pioneers of the city. Silas Farmer, another city historian, documented early Indigenous histories, but focused more on what Europeans contributed to Detroit (Mays 2015). Important to both Burton and Farmer was documenting perhaps the most significant event in Detroit's history – Pontiac's so-called 'conspiracy.'

In May of 1763, The Odawa chief Pontiac gathered hundreds of Indigenous nations across the Midwestern United States with the idea of driving the British out of North America once and for all. The conflict lasted until the Fall of that year, ending in a stalemate at Detroit, although other forts were taken. Pontiac left the area and never came back, dying in Illinois country in 1769 (Dowd 2002). Still, the story lasted well into the late nineteenth and twentieth century and became a key mechanism through which elite white men like Burton and Farmer constructed their sense of belonging in Detroit (Mays 2016). With Pontiac and early Indigenous resistance conquered, elite white men of the city memorialized him by creating an image of him and putting his head on the Pontiac car. Thus, these elites could speak of Indigenous people mostly in the past (O'Brien 2010) and, to an extent, continue to do so in the present. While the use of Pontiac is not as pervasive as it once was, the trope of settling Detroit continues with venture capitalists moving in to reclaim the city, this time from Black people.

African Americans have been in Detroit since the early part of the nineteenth century. As Katzman (1973) observes in his study of nineteenth century Black residents of Detroit, the majority – free people living in the southern United States – came from the Virginia cities of Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg in the late 1830s and 1840s (p. 13). They came to escape racist black code laws in the south implemented after white southerners began to further marginalize people of African descent, regardless of their status, following Nat Turner's rebellion, in which a group of slaves went from plantation to plantation freeing the enslaved and murdering white people.

In the twentieth century, a large majority of Black Americans who came to Detroit arrived in two waves: between 1910 and 1920 and during World War II. According to historian Beth Bates (2012, p. 16), between 1910 and 1930, Black Detroiters went from just 1 percent of the population to nearly 8 percent of the city's population, which was a 2,000 percent increase. They came to northern and western US cities looking for work and opportunity, and to escape Jim Crow racism. In the city of Detroit, many settled on the city's east side in what



was called the Black Bottom. There, migrants found not a place of opportunity but of segregation, crowded, dilapidated, subpar housing, filled with people still searching for their American dream. Whites used segregation to keep a distance between themselves and the Black population. As historian Thomas Sugrue (1996) points out, Detroit became a predominantly Black city in no small part due to white flight to the suburbs.

Today, the gentrification of Detroit is reminiscent of settler colonial logics. Though Indigenous people remain in the City (even though they are largely invisible in mainstream representation), the displacement and taking away of resources does not just affect them, but also the city's largest population: Black Americans. While the Black American experience of enslavement is different from Indigenous dispossession (even as they emerged from the same settler state), they too suffer from colonial logics. As Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd (2011, p. xiii) writes, 'as a transit, Indianness becomes a site through which US empire orients and replicates itself by transforming those to be colonized into "Indians" through continual reiterations of pioneer logics.' I use this framing carefully, for Indigenous people still remain in the city; however, Black displacement is based upon the same logic of settlement and elimination (Wolfe 2006).<sup>2</sup> They are, like their Indigenous comrades, subjected to frontier discourses and settlement practices reminiscent of dispossessions of the past and based upon colonial logics of land as wide open and populations unfit to govern themselves, even as actual Indigenous people continue to live in the city. As urban geographer Neil Smith (1996, p. xv) notes, 'the frontier discourse serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest, whether in the eighteenth and nineteenth century West, or in the late-twentieth century inner city.' I want to be clear that Black people are not settlers like Europeans. As Nishant Upadhyay suggests in this volume, the term 'settler' does not fully consider the unique positionalities of Black folks nor does it take into account the violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Thus, Detroit is a place that is fundamentally anti-Black, built upon displacement, historical policies of segregation and underdevelopment, and most recently the undemocratic implementation of an emergency financial manager (We The People of Detroit 2017).

### **Detroit scholarship and popular media**

Current scholarship on Detroit centres on narratives of decline and possible avenues of revitalization. The decline narrative exists within a discourse of Black political failure, beginning with the 1967 racial rebellion and culminating in the election of Coleman A. Young, Detroit's first Black mayor, in 1974. The majority of scholarship on urban development and community formation in Detroit has tended to focus on labour and factories, Black-white relations, and the failing of Detroit after the 1967 rebellion (Bates 2012). According to

geographers and historians, disinvestment, suburbanization, and racism, or more precisely anti-blackness, are the key reasons for Detroit's underdevelopment. Geographer June Thomas (1997, p. 2) argues that Detroit has not developed because it did not have the 'implementation tools and administrative structures necessary to ward off the city's deterioration,' and the Federal government 'did as much to build up the suburbs as they did to buttress central cities.' In addition, she argues that white racism played a part in the city's underdevelopment. 'White preference for racial segregation,' writes Thomas, 'warped the city's public housing program, slowed down its redevelopment efforts, and blocked neighborhood upgrading.'

An article published in the *New York Times* in 2013 summarizes the rapid decline narrative in five parts: an overreliance on the auto industry; tensions between Blacks and whites; a lack of Black leadership; lack of a quality transit system; and the impact of poverty (Padnani 2013). The article hints at the structural causes that led to Detroit's decline, and even though it cites an essay by historian Thomas Sugrue, it fails to capture a fundamental issue he wrote about his 1996 book: Detroit's decline began with racist governmental policies going back to the 1940s. As Sugrue (1996, p. 126) notes, 'the 1950s marked a decisive turning point in the development of the city – systematic restructuring of the local economy from which the city never fully recovered' and of which Blacks bore the brunt. Padnani's narrative in the *New York Times* (which represents the dominant one) perpetuates ideas laid out in Detroit 2.0 rhetoric – that whites need to come in and save Detroit.

Entirely neglected in these accounts, however, is the significant role that representations of Indigenous people have had on Detroit's modern, discursive development since the nineteenth century. Indeed, constructing whiteness (in Detroit) through representations of Indigenous people is as American as cherry pie. For example, General Motors named a subsidiary after perhaps the most famous Indigenous person in Detroit's history, the Odawa war chief Pontiac. Beyond Pontiac, Indigenous people have made their mark on the city, and continue to do so (Danziger 1991, Mays 2015). The Dakota intellectual Charles Eastman lived in Detroit for ten years from 1929 to 1939. In 1918, before he lived in the city, a local YMCA named its summer camp 'Camp Ohiyesa' after him, using his Indigenous name. The camp, officially called Camp Ohiyesa of Metropolitan Detroit, still exists. Written in an almost mythic way, the camp's official description (YMCA Detroit 2017) states, 'Early campers of Ohiyesa saw the man himself walk the shore, swim the lake, and teach on and about the 300 acres of land and forest.' In the history of Detroit, Indigenous people are no more, and besides the name Pontiac and a few other representations rooted in settler imaginings of Indigenous people, there is hardly anything that would indicate that Indigenous people ever lived in the city.

For instance, Rebecca Kinney's *A Beautiful Wasteland* (2016) sums up how the media creates hegemonic narratives of contemporary Detroit. Framing Detroit as a postindustrial frontier city, Kinney writes, it is a place conceptualized as 'nearly empty and therefore an ideal space to fill with our continued national preoccupations about progress and mobility' (p. xix). Kinney continues that Detroit, as a metaphor for the postindustrial frontier, 'is a place to stake claims and (maybe) realize success, but perhaps more important, it is a place to locate dreams' (p. xix). This discourse exists within the larger framework of settler colonialism, a process that includes not only ongoing dispossession but also continued attempts at cultural annihilation.

According to Yellowknives Dene theorist Glen Coulthard (2014, pp. 6–7), 'a settler colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of domination' consisting of 'interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power,' which creates a 'sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their land and self-determining authority.' The key point here is that dispossession and powerlessness continue well into the present.

For my purposes, I want to place settler colonialism within the context of culture. While settler colonialism is a political project with material ramifications, most notably land dispossession and genocide, the cultural ramifications both for the settler state (and its people) and Indigenous nations are just as profound. In a three-pronged process of Indigenous dispossession, the settler state's population first settles on a land and claims it as their own, usually renaming it. Then, it physically removes the pre-existing population. Finally, the settler state creates narratives of the inevitable disappearance of the Indigenous population. These narratives coincide with what Indigenous scholar Philip Deloria (1998) calls 'playing Indian,' where settlers perform an idea of indigeneity while also assuming that Indigenous people are no longer living. Unlike other cities with larger Indigenous populations, such as Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Phoenix, or Tucson, Detroit has no visible presence of Indigenous peoples (either past or present) beyond perhaps, as previously mentioned, the (now defunct) Pontiac car brand. With playing Indian comes writing and imagining Native people out of existence, even as actual Native people and cultures still exist. As Shaista Patel alludes to in this issue, Indigenous invisibility and antiblackness, as symbols of meaning, can be used by Europeans in order to further construct themselves as the colonizers. In this way, antiblackness and Indigenous invisibility are connected. Through Detroit 2.0 rhetoric and accompanying policies of saving the city from Black folks, people like Dan Gilbert continue the frontier logic of erasure, continuing the dispossession of Indigenous people by treating Black people in a similar manner. It is within this context of erasure, and the newly emergent pressures exerted by creative city/creative class planning,

that a little known but thriving Indigenous culture has emerged: Native American Hip Hop.

Numerous articles, books, and essays document how Hip Hop as a creative practice, emerged, really, out of the late 1970s South Bronx. Amidst great social change and poverty, the closing down of social services and eradication of educational and creative programming for youth, young people created a cultural movement that is still with us to this day (Rose 1994, Chang 2007). Hip Hop has gone global and is used by marginalized and oppressed people all over the world as a creative artistic practice of self-expression in order to assert their voices and their humanity. Although a cultural practice, Hip Hop and Black music, in this case rap music, has become, according to Shana Redmond (2014), an anthem – a voice through which oppressed peoples express their pains and joys, their rage and anger, and their fight for the soul of humanity.

### **Indigenous Hip Hop culture in Detroit**

Music and Detroit are synonymous. The smooth melodies of Motown served as the cultural sound for a whole generation. Members of the Hip Hop Generation know Detroit as the home of Eminem, Big Sean, Royce Da 5'9, and Danny Brown. These artists have placed Detroit on the map in the rap game. Forgotten in this discussion, just like in US mainstream society more generally, are the stories of Native people in cities. There are more than 8,000 Native people living in Detroit today, and many are making noise, challenging Indigenous peoples' invisibility. They are creating anthems for a generation of Indigenous activists and youth, who now have the opportunity to express their cultures through Hip Hop.

Indigenous Hip Hop remains one of the most understudied topics within Indigenous studies, cultural studies, and Hip Hop studies (Ullestad 1999, Lashua and Fox 2006, Morgan and Warren 2010, Navarro 2015). With the exception of Navarro (2015), scholars of Hip Hop are not generally located within Indigenous studies (they write about Indigenous people but do not squarely place themselves in Indigenous scholarship). My approach to Indigenous Hip Hop connects it with Indigenous modernity and looks at how it constructs new ideas of what it means to be Indigenous today. It is difficult to determine why, but (after speaking with numerous artists over the years) there seems to be a prevailing notion that Native Hip Hop artists are an anomaly. And there is also a dearth of scholarship in general on urban Indigenous people (for exceptions, see Fixico 2000, Thrush 2007, Rosenthal 2012, Peters and Andersen 2013, LaPier and Beck 2015). I build upon the few studies that have appeared by illustrating how Indigenous people (considered premodern) living in cities (considered modern) are not, in fact, incompatible. My analysis challenges the persistent belief among non-

Indigenous people that Native people are not modern and therefore cannot engage in and produce modern cultural products like Hip Hop. Moreover, within some Indigenous communities, the idea remains that blending Hip Hop (or even living off reservation) with 'traditions,' however defined, makes one less Indigenous – as if there is only one way to be Indigenous.

The important thing is that Native people are producing the music, the aesthetic, the style, and the clothing. This is what makes the culture uniquely Indigenous. All around the world, Hip Hop becomes something unique when it enters a particular locale (Chang 2007). Detroit is no different than anywhere else in this regard. Indigenous Hip Hop in the Motor City reflects the particular experience of an urban Indigenous people living in a predominantly Black space, and long histories of interaction, solidarity, and related/shared struggle between Black and Indigenous peoples throughout the United States. For example, in 1920, Carter G. Woodson, the 'Father of Black History,' wrote, 'One of the longest unwritten chapters in the history of the United States is that treating of the relations of the Negroes and the Indians' (p. 45). This gap in scholarship remains today outside of familiar stories of African enslavement and Indigenous dispossession among a few tribal nations of the southeast in the nineteenth century. We forget, however, that Black and Indigenous people engaged in longer struggles together, and in parallel, well into the twentieth century, and continue to do so today.

For instance, the great, Black American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois and the prolific Dakota intellectual and medical doctor Charles Eastman (mentioned above) both attended the Universal Races Congress in 1911 and spoke at the same session (Mays 2013). While history does not reveal the extent of their interaction, their speeches shared similar themes of living in a country in which their people were second-class citizens, suffering under the dual oppressions of settler colonialism and white supremacy. During the height of US social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Black American and Indigenous peoples' struggles again intersected at times, from Elaine Brown of the Black Panther Party supporting a halt to the extradition of Dennis Banks, wanted by the United States government after being convicted of assault with a deadly weapon and rioting in 1973 at the Custer County Courthouse in South Dakota, to the late comedian and social activist Dick Gregory fasting in solidarity with Native peoples occupying Wounded Knee in the same year. In turn, Native people went to the Poor Peoples' Campaign in Memphis, Tennessee to challenge the exploitation of workers in the United States in June 1968 (Cobb 2008). Of course, today Black and Indigenous political movements are intersecting in solidarity again with the Movement for Black Lives and standing in solidarity with the water protectors and Standing Rock Sioux who continue to fight against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Black and Indigenous people share a relationship in the United States based upon similar oppressions and also interactions through

activism and cultural exchange. Thus, Indigenous Hip Hop is a part of a longer struggle of speaking out against shared injustices with other oppressed groups and demonstrating solidarity across races, colonialisms, and borders.

### **From Turtle Island to Palestine: creating inter/national Indigenous solidarity**

Building solidarity across racial borders is important; it is also significant to build Indigenous solidarity across settler states. Take, for instance, Sacramento Knox. He is Anishinaabeg (Walpole Island) and Chicanx. Knox is a Hip Hop artist and critical media producer; that is, he creates beats and rhymes, and also helps communities create critical media to counter narratives of Detroit's decline and build critical decolonial solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. His website has the simple but profound moniker, 'Music is Medicine: Create. Educate. Motivate. Inspire' (Knox 2016). For instance, in an interview with Michigan Radio's 'Songs from Studio East' series he discussed how being Anishinaabe and Chicanx and living in Detroit has shaped his career as an artist who makes music for social change. He noted that he has 'been making music that's been helping movements,' – making 'We art,' – 'which tells our history as well as people, our togetherness as a collective and humanity.' He has also made sure to produce work that documents Indigenous solidarity, including producing a documentary showing how the Idle No More Movement among First Nations in Canada sparked a movement in Detroit.<sup>3</sup> In the course of showing solidarity with other oppressed groups, he began to make connections with the oppressed people of Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

In 2014, Sacramento Knox made a video with Palestinian rapper Sharif Zakot. Sharif is a youth organizer who works in the Bay Area (California), serving as the Arab Youth Organizing (AYO!) programme coordinator. It is unsurprising that Palestinians, like other oppressed groups, have turned to Hip Hop culture in order to express their pain and marginalization. As Maira and Shihade (2012, p. 2) contend, 'Palestinian rap belongs to a longer genealogy of Arab protest music and poetry and aesthetic innovation, re-creating and sampling traditional forms while (re)imagining national community and transnational movements in particular historical moments.' Sharif is making connections with other Indigenous persons, in this case, one who represents Indigenous peoples who continue to live on colonized land themselves. Their collaborative video is called 'From stolen land to stolen land.'

The images in the video go from New York City to Detroit to Palestine. Sharif writes 'Free Palestine' in marker on a metal object. The video cuts to Knox standing on the Brooklyn Bridge, and then to a slogan that says 'Free Rasmea Odeh,' a long time Palestinian activist who was arrested in October 2013 and indicted on federal charges of Unlawful Procurement of Naturalization. On March 23, 2017, she accepted a plea deal that saw her plead

guilty, lose her US citizenship, and accept deportation out of the country permanently (Rasmea Defense Committee 2017). As the words appear on the screen, we see a blurry vision of the Statue of Liberty in the background. While that statue symbolizes freedom for some, this is not the case for all, including Odeh and the continent's Indigenous people.

The song itself is about the lack of freedom for Black and brown, especially, Palestinian and Native American. Sharif begins rapping the lines,

1948 they didn't hesitate to shoot displaced most our population time and  
time from  
they roots  
Then they tried to hide the proof  
Looks like 1492  
different time different place  
the same white supremacist rule.

The lyrics connect white supremacy with the occupation and displacement of Indigenous peoples' land. In this way, the two rappers describe the ongoing processes of settler colonialism, recalling Coulthard's definition cited above. Even though they acknowledge that the colonization of Palestine and the Americas happened at different times, the similarities of occupation join them together.

Knox and Sharif go on to make critical connections between efforts to end the occupation of Palestine and to decolonize the city of Detroit. The artists link the roots of European colonization in the Americas beginning in 1492 to the occupation of Palestinian land in 1948. In building these connections, Knox and Sharif create a culture of decolonial solidarity, a potential model for trans-Indigenous resistance to colonialism. Knox raps, 'decolonization is more than just fancy phrases / More like a movement that's practiced on the daily.' Decolonization for Knox is about making connections beyond Detroit and even the United States through Hip Hop. Knox passes the flow back to Sharif, who raps:

we about returning liberation  
turtle Island to Palestine and self-determination  
we'll replant every tree  
rebuild every home  
and until we see that day  
our resistance lives on

The track ends with moving images of abandoned buildings, views from the streets of Detroit. It then reads in the top corner 'Stolen Land to Stolen Land,' with the sun setting, and to the right a faint image of the

Statue of Liberty suggests that liberation is on the way. The artists play on the contradictions of the Statue of Liberty, which symbolizes freedom and opportunity for some, but for Indigenous and other oppressed people in the US it is a symbol of anything but a place of opportunity. While liberty may be the epitome of US citizenship, the blurriness of the statue signifies that this symbol has not worked for colonized Indigenous people. Freedom and equality, in other words, can never happen, or at least can only happen in a limited manner under the current construction of society. Indigenous Hip Hop might be one way of connecting two disparate movements for liberation.

For Knox, placing Detroit into larger struggles is significant for a few reasons. First, the city of Detroit is occupied land, both in current manifestations of Black American displacement made invisible by social policies in the city, and as dispossessed Indigenous land, which people have forgotten. Second, connecting struggles of occupation in the Motor City to those in Palestine builds solidarities between two Indigenous groups. For instance, Palestinian activists gave advice to Ferguson activists via social media in 2014 on how to deal with tear gas during their rebellion against police brutality.<sup>5</sup> In turn, Black Lives Matter made a statement of solidarity with Palestine, seeking an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian homelands.

By collaborating with Palestinian activist and Hip Hop artist Sharif, Knox contributes to what Palestinian scholar Steven Salaita (2016) calls inter/nationalism, or building solidarity between Indigenous North Americans and Palestinians, in this case uniquely through Hip Hop culture. In calling for this particular type of solidarity, Salaita writes, 'inter/nationalism describes a certain type of decolonial thought and practice ... renewed vigorously in different strata of American Indian and Palestinian communities,' and 'demands commitment to mutual liberation based on the proposition that colonial power must be rendered diffuse across multiple hemispheres through reciprocal struggle' (p. ix). Indigenous Hip Hop artists have already begun the decolonial work of creating change in the city. They do workshops with youth as well as work with Black activists. Artists like Knox have also shown solidarity with the Flint Water Crisis and Standing Rock water protectors by producing anthems of resistance and healing. Knox has produced tracks such as 'Get Back Black Snake' and 'Nakweeshkodaadiidaa Ekoobiyyag' (Let's Meet Up by the Water).<sup>6</sup> In creating music that is relevant to particular struggles, they create anthems and give voice to Indigenous struggles through dope beats that ensure Indigenous issues are heard. Indeed, Detroit's Indigenous Hip Hop community offers examples of the type of solidarity work that artists in other cities might follow in order to ensure that Black and Indigenous lives matter.



## Conclusion

Indigenous Hip Hop has the potential to not only disrupt settler imaginings of Indigenous people, but also, through the arts, to challenge the Detroit 2.0 rhetoric that continues to erase and dispossess Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized people in the city. Indigenous Hip Hop has the potential to reimagine Detroit as a space of opportunity for Indigenous people. It offers ways to challenge the idea that they are no longer here, to build collaborations across races and borders, as well as to show solidarity with other marginalized peoples. In producing Indigenous Hip Hop in the Motor City, artists like Knoxx engage in a politics of decolonization that is inclusive (of Black and Palestinian folks) in nature.

In a settler state designed for the perpetual dispossession of Indigenous people, it is difficult to make Indigenous people and their particular problems visible. This is doubly hard for urban Indigenous people when, in general, their life in the city appears contrary to their supposed placement on a reserve/ation. However, Indigenous Hip Hop, as a culture, with its creative energy and ingenuity, has the potential and possibility to alter the discourse about Detroit right now and going forward. It is, in fact, engaging in the politics of possibility – rooted in disrupting the many manifestations of colonialism. These artists are demonstrating what ‘we must develop a praxis of space sharing and revolutionary joint struggle against oppression of all kinds.’ Furthermore, they contend, ‘to overcome US and Israeli violence, this requires a politics that is simultaneously antimilitarist, anti-imperialist, and antiracist (specifically opposing anti-Blackness) – both from organizers in the United States and in historic Palestine’ (Bailey 2015, p. 1023). Indigenous Hip Hop artists are creatively making this possible.

The work of Detroit 2.0 fails the most marginalized populations. Today, even Richard Florida, whose ideas partly fuelled the massive inequality we now see in urban cores like Detroit, has backtracked in his new book, *The New Urban Crisis* (2017), regarding his earlier claims that creative types could transform cities and create prosperity for all. He even notes the massive increase in inequality between the rich and poor in urban cores (Florida 2017). Nevertheless, Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized groups in Detroit will continue to resist, as they have always done, and cultural practice will be one of the ways they do so.

## Notes

1. It is important to note that Kevyn Orr declared the bankruptcy, not the democratically elected city council, which serves as the representative body of the people of Detroit.
2. I am not saying that Black Americans have the same experience of Indigenous people. However, they suffer under the same logics of settler colonialism:

dispossession and elimination. Furthermore, it is important that we see the connections between African enslavement and Indigenous dispossession as emerging from the same settler state, as those histories run in parallel.

3. Sacramento Knox, 'NiimiDAA/Idle No More/ZaGaaJibiiSing Solidarity.' January 26, 2014. The video description says, 'This musical documentation was produced by Sacramento Knox with support from the Raiz Up Hip Hop Collective in solidarity with Idle No More. ZagaaJibiiSing aka (Detroit-Windsor) is Anishinaabemowin for 'place that sticks out of the river.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWZ1LmrYNLg>.
4. Palestine, which became a settler colony in 1948, has increasingly become a major part of Indigenous Studies as an analytical case study for settler colonialism—for Palestinians as a people suffering under the yoke of Israeli occupation (Cheyfitz 2014). The Native American and Indigenous Studies Association has endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (NAISA 2013), which seeks to build solidarity in order to end Israeli settler colonialism using tactics similar to the global campaign to end South African apartheid in the 1980s (Salaita 2016). Robert Warrior published an essay in 1989 titled, 'Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians,' that, in some ways, signalled a longer relationship between Palestinians and Indigenous studies. This relationship has seeped into Indigenous activism. Russell Means (2009), the long-time activist and early leader of the American Indian Movement, stated before he passed on, 'the American Indians are the Palestinians of America and the Palestinians in Gaza are the American Indians of the Middle East.' It is not surprising, then, that Detroit Indigenous artists have made connections with Palestinian Hip Hop artists. In this way, they are representing Indigenous struggles in two very different contexts, but pushing forward an agenda of global Indigenous solidarity.
5. There have been numerous essays written on Black-Palestinian solidarity. However, as Kristian Bailey (2015) points out, this activism is not new, and has existed at least since the social movements of the 1960s.
6. There are other artists in Detroit doing similar work. For example, SouFy has produced a track titled 'Pay 2 Be Poisoned' about the Flint Water Crisis. Another artist, Christy B., creates arts to show the ongoing water shut offs in the city of Detroit. In fact, she is a part of the Aaziidookan, a collective of Black and Indigenous artists resisting antiblackness and settler colonialism through art and culture in Detroit.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Kyle T. Mays** (Black/Saginaw Anishinaabe) is a transdisciplinary scholar in the Department of African American Studies and the American Indian Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *Hip Hop Beats, Indigenous Rhymes: Modernity and Hip Hop in Indigenous North America* (SUNY Press, 2018).

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