

## The Cultural Ecology of Alaskan Indigenous Hip Hop: “Ixsixán, Aḵ Kwáan (I Love You My People)”

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### Abstract

In hip-hop studies, Indigenous rap music has been garnering increasing attention alongside other non-mainstream manifestations of this 'glocal' genre, and the field has begun to address the significance of specific locales for artistic expression. Worried about environmental studies research that extracts ecological insights from Indigenous cultures without paying attention to colonial history, Indigenous scholars have been critiquing how non-Indigenous colleagues frequently misconstrue the myriad ways in which place, language, knowledge, and cultural identity are intertwined in tribal cultures. Bringing these discourses into conversation, this article focuses on three music videos produced as part of the Native Connections program of the Tlingit and Haida's Tribal Family and Youth Services department in 2018 and 2019. These videos, which feature the Juneau-based rappers Arias Hoyle and Chris Talley alongside other Indigenous adolescents, verbally and visually convey an understanding of their environment not as mere setting, but rather as a source of cultural-historical knowledge and current intergenerational cultural practice. Both location and language are showcased as repositories of cultural identification. The juxtapositions of seemingly untouched landscapes and settled cityscapes as well as of English and Tlingit can be read as confirming ecocritical theories that emphasize the ways in which cultural products address seemingly dichotomous elements such as nature/culture as interdependent. The hip-hop lyrics and videos examined here balance awareness of the historical baggage of settler-colonialism with the intellectually and spiritually invigorating celebration of a locally rooted Indigenous identity, which is neither stuck in the past nor unaware of the world at large. These works thus participate in the “cultural ecology” (Hubert Zapf) of hip hop by mapping out an artistic place defined by Alaskan Indigenous—and especially Tlingit—culture and community in Juneau, without losing sight of larger geographical and sociopolitical contexts.

*Keywords:* Cultural ecology, postcolonial ecocriticism, Indigenous hip hop, Indigenous rap music, Tlingit, bilingualism.

### Resumen

En los estudios sobre el hip-hop, la música de rap indígena ha ido recibiendo cada vez más atención, junto con otras manifestaciones no convencionales de este género 'glocal', y el campo ha comenzado a abordar la importancia de lugares específicos en la expresión artística. Preocupados por la investigación de los estudios medioambientales que extraen conocimientos ecológicos de las culturas indígenas sin prestar atención a la historia colonial, los académicos indígenas han criticado cómo los profesionales no indígenas suelen malinterpretar las múltiples formas en que el lugar, la lengua, el conocimiento y la identidad cultural se entrelazan en las culturas tribales. Llevando estos discursos a la conversación, este artículo se centra en tres vídeos musicales producidos como parte del programa Conexiones Nativas del departamento de Servicios Familiares y Juveniles Tribales de los Tlingit y Haida en 2018 y 2019. Estos vídeos, en los que aparecen los raperos de Juneau Arias Hoyle y Chris Talley junto a otros adolescentes indígenas, transmiten verbal y visualmente una comprensión de su entorno no como mero escenario, sino como fuente de conocimiento histórico-cultural y práctica cultural intergeneracional actual. Tanto el lugar como la lengua se muestran como depósitos de identificación cultural. Las yuxtaposiciones de paisajes aparentemente vírgenes y paisajes urbanos habitados, así como del inglés y el tlingit, pueden leerse como una confirmación de las teorías ecocríticas que hacen hincapié en las formas en que los productos culturales abordan elementos aparentemente dicotómicos como la naturaleza/cultura como interdependientes. Las letras y los

vídeos de hip-hop examinados aquí equilibran la conciencia del bagaje histórico del colonialismo de los colonos con la celebración intelectual y espiritualmente vigorizante de una identidad indígena arraigada localmente, que no está anclada en el pasado ni es ajena al mundo en general. Así, estas obras participan en la "ecología cultural" (Hubert Zapf) del hip hop al trazar un lugar artístico definido por la cultura y la comunidad indígena de Alaska—y especialmente tlingit—en Juneau, sin perder de vista contextos geográficos y sociopolíticos más amplios.

*Palabras clave:* Ecología cultural, ecocrítica poscolonial, hip hop indígena, música rap indígena, Tlingit, bilingüismo.

## Introduction

So far, rap music has been predominantly studied as an urban phenomenon, and ecocritical studies of hip-hop culture are scarce (Balestrini). In the early 2000s, ecocriticism began to expand its purview from notions like natural beauty and wilderness to include a more variegated range of environments (Bennet), so that ecocritical readings of urban settings became more widespread. At the same time, postcolonial theory contributed to broadening ecocriticism's scope by shifting the field from primarily white, male, and upper- and middle-class perspectives toward a remarkably larger purview (Cilano and DeLoughrey; Smith; Ruffin; Baldwin; Parham and Westling). This essay focuses on hip hop by predominately Indigenous youth in Juneau, Alaska, that is, in a municipality comprising a small urban area of 36 km<sup>2</sup> plus an immense geographical expanse of over eight thousand km<sup>2</sup> which includes mountains, glaciers, a channel, and islands. It will address how these youths relate to their specific home turf and its Indigenous and colonial histories. It will also discuss how their current local community impacts their artistic processes of meaning-making.

Not surprisingly, studying works by Indigenous artists requires awareness of the sociopolitical power relations that are central to postcolonial theorizations of settler colonialism and that mirror long-standing debates about the relation between nature and culture. European colonists and subsequent generations of settlers relegated Indigenous languages and other media of self-expression to a realm of 'nature' that was strictly separated from the colonizers' claim to defining and possessing 'culture.' As the ecocritical readings in this article show, Indigenous hip hop that engages with the postcolonial implications of such a nature/culture divide can reveal the ongoing impact of settler-colonialism as well as the assertiveness of contemporary Indigenous cultural practice.

Linda Hutcheon argues that particularly non-white artists and scholars (as well as women) have been instrumental in critiquing "emancipatory universality" (124) as one of "modernity's claims" that must be reconsidered for its anything-but-emancipatory impact. Scholars have become cognizant of how the "discourse of colonialism" has employed "signifying practices whose work it is to *produce and naturalise* the hierarchical power structures in the management of both colonial and neo-colonial cross-cultural relationships" (Slemon qtd. in Hutcheon 127). In order to counteract "modernity's impulse to authorize, legislate, systematize, totalize, and synthesize" (Hutcheon 135), we

need to replace “modern *either/or* binaries” with “postmodern *both/and* thinking” (139). I reference Hutcheon’s sagacious 1993 article here because the shift from the acceptance of a seemingly clear, simplistically stable binary (“*either/or*”) to tolerance for the potentially oxymoronic or otherwise indeterminate and unsettling negotiation of “*both/and*” simultaneity can be fruitfully combined with Hubert Zapf’s more recent theory of cultural ecology. Analogous to Hutcheon’s suggestions about how scholars can avoid replicating the limitations of hierarchical and universalizing modernity, Zapf’s theory offers an alternative to the one-way street of dichotomy-based ecocritical thinking: the exploratory possibilities of dynamic linkages.

According to Zapf, “cultural ecology is distinct from [...] universalizing ecocentric theories in that it thinks together the two axiomatic premises of an ecological epistemology, [which are] connectivity *and* diversity, relationality *and* difference” (138). In other words, “cultural ecology” does not regard unifying factors from a universalist perspective. Instead of negating boundaries, it studies their cultural-historical dimension alongside their meaning-making potential. Nature and culture are, consequently, analyzed as interlinked phenomena without collapsing them into one another. Cultural ecology avoids “an ecocentric phenomenology” focused on the physical body in favor of the “basic premise of a vital interrelatedness yet evolutionary difference between culture and nature” (139). The interpretation of literary texts, as Zapf demonstrates, yields “new hypotheses [that] emerge from the explorative dialogic interplay between different domains” so that literature itself becomes “a source of cultural-ecological knowledge” (144). In addition to this double perspective on nature and culture as coexisting rather than indistinguishably boundaryless, Zapf proposes author- and work-specific analyses in light of cultural ecology as a heuristic framework. This approach can help scholars realize that the notion of hip-hop ecologies in the plural asks them to refrain from sweeping claims about hip hop-related artistic genres. Instead, it will be necessary to explore how particular works calibrate the nature–culture relation. In studying works by Indigenous hip-hop artists, this kind of both/and thinking facilitates viewing individual works with the history of colonization in mind, but not entirely defined by it. Furthermore, cultural ecology as an approach encourages attention to individual outlooks on nature–culture relations rather than presupposing that these relations are given—for instance, if one were to regard ethnic or cultural backgrounds as essentialist and thus rigid.

An anti-essentialist outlook encourages meticulous attention to individual artists and artefacts. Similarly, ecocritical readings of Indigenous hip-hop require a non-universalizing approach to space, place, and relationality. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist, argues that non-Indigenous scholars in various ecology-focused fields have extracted useful details through “the documentation of Indigenous Knowledge” (“Anticolonial” 380). They have failed, however, to grasp the significance of Indigenous languages and of “land-based” traditions of “teaching and learning” (380). For Gregory Cajete, who also emphasizes close links between “place as a living presence” (182) and “language” (183), the reciprocal and agentic relation between land and spoken human language culminates in the conviction that places and people are mutually constitutive. This triangular relation of specific locales,

individuals/communities, and verbal enunciation that Cajete and Simpson promote needs to be part of an ecocritical reading of artistic works that engage Indigenous cultural practices.

This article will focus on three hip-hop videos produced in Alaska’s capital, Juneau, in 2018 and 2019 as part of a youth program for Indigenous cultural self-expression. These videos present the city and its environs, the local community’s material culture, the Tlingit language, and Indigenous spiritual traditions of the Southeast Alaska panhandle as tightly interlaced in ways that enable a multi-ethnic local population to thrive and to communicate across ethnicities, generations, and regions. In addition to focusing on a group of works from Alaska, a geographical region which has not yet garnered much attention as hip-hop territory—be it by popular music audiences or by scholars—this case study contributes to developing fruitful intersections among ecocriticism, hip-hop studies, and Indigenous studies by explaining how the three music videos interlace local environment, cultural-historical knowledge, bilingualism, and contemporary self-definition in an intergenerational community. Tlingit heritage as found in Juneau serves as a unifying focal point for local youths of multiple ethnicities: locations—ranging from glaciers to museums—visually display heritage and arts as both contemporary and ancient; the same locations also figure as settings for learning and for expressing cultural identification, thus providing physical, intellectual, spiritual, and social nurture.

### **Indigenous Hip Hop: State of Research**

Indigenous hip-hop artists have been confronted with mainstream expectations as to their looks and outfits, the contents of their lyrics, and the ostensibly ‘natural’ impulse to write exclusively for Indigenous audiences (Amsterdam 53). As scholars in musicology, ethnology, anthropology, history, literary studies, and American Studies have argued, such pigeonholing is frequently rooted in dichotomous understandings of ‘modernity’ versus ‘tradition.’ Victoria Levine points out that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European conceptualizations of modernity and Indigeneity have consistently been used to justify settler colonialism and its aftermath by characterizing Western cultures as embodying progress, mobility, and wholesome “break[s] with tradition,” whereas the same conceptualizations denigrated Indigenous cultures by claiming that they were cut off from modernity by “antiquated customs and rural lifestyles” (1). As an antidote to such a simplistic perspective on future-oriented progress versus backward pastness, Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee stress that “tradition is not a static category, but one that is contested and evolving” (“Introduction” 4). U.S.-based musicologists have also been arguing that the long-standing focus on “*Time*, the original structuring principle of musicological inquiry, is making room for a new organizing framework based on the phenomenology of *space*” (Fink qtd. in Garrett et al. 708). The resulting “emphasis on culture as spatial process” (710) coheres with a parallel development in the history of rap music: for instance, Murray Forman explains the diversification of hip hop as expressing “a more pronounced level of spatial awareness” (250), which has made rap artists “alternative cartographers” (249). The claim that hip hop represents a metaphorical act

of map-making—a process which is a classic settler-colonial expression of claiming ownership of and power over land—can also be found in studies of Indigenous rap artists. Lauren Amsterdam thus describes how hip hop produces “cartographies of continuity over stolen lands and constricted latitudes of existence” (54). Reading rap as a vehicle for reclaiming Indigenous land does not only cohere with Indigenous notions of historicity which privilege space over time (Nabokov 131); it also encourages ecocritical analyses of how words, sounds, and visual elements do so in rap videos.

The shift toward specific locales and towards artistic acts of mapping on the part of Indigenous rappers is complemented by studying locally anchored Indigenous composers and musicians as participants in larger cultural networks that negate the boundaries created by settler colonialism. Referring to Maximilian C. Forte’s work, Jessica L. Horton agrees that “forms of translocal and transnational connectivity were present between indigenous communities in the Americas long before their contact with Europeans. Forte’s long view of history is a useful starting point for considering indigenous cultures as potential sources for conceptualizing transnational processes, rather than inert systems under attack by globalization” and for understanding “that definitions of indigeneity are changeable and require significant historical nuance” (Horton; cf. Forte). In his work on Indigenous hip-hop artists, Christopher Aplin describes this phenomenon as Indigenous “cosmopolitanism—their sociomusical mastery of cross-border movement and artistic synthesis” (“Get Tribal” 114; cf. Simpson, “Indigenous” 24). Physical and metaphorical border-crossings ultimately show that Indigenous cultures are neither consigned to the past nor unable to change, evolve, and survive in the present. As Aplin puts it: “The unexpectedness of Native hip-hop presumes the isolation or unchanging timelessness of Native communities, thus depriving them of a sense of Indigenous modernity” (“Expectation” 43). In other words, the act of acknowledging what Aplin calls “Indigenous modernity” is an act of perceiving hip hop from Zapf’s and Hutcheon’s “*both/and*” vantage point rather than as an oxymoron.

Similar to the social relations of border-crossing cultural exchange, Indigenous popular music performances provide an “interactional structure” (Berglund et al., “Introduction” 5). Vine Deloria, Jr., even claims that “knowledgeable singers use song to alter aspects of the time-space continuum and to alter other natural laws” (qtd. in Berglund et al., “Introduction” 5). An ecocritical understanding of locations as interactants rather than mere geographical coordinates heightens awareness of musical performances as engaging with environments in site-specific ways. According to place studies theory, individual and group experiences, interpretations, and attitudes transform a physical location (“space”) into a “place” (Easterlin 228). To understand that humans thus project onto a place specific meanings, functions, and feelings for long or short time periods (232) complements a central trajectory of cultural ecology: to scrutinize how literature intervenes in cultural evolution. Thus, I will discuss how rap lyrics and their performance in significant locations jointly convey “the dynamics of place-in-process” (228) and how these dynamics contribute to the depiction and assertion of place-based identity construction.

## Mediating Alaskan Environments and Indigenous Culture

In recent years, scholars have observed that hip hop is being used to foster appreciation of lived Indigenous heritage. According to Amsterdam, “artists’ desires to enroll Native youth in heritage exploration through hip-hop demonstrates that music is action with revolutionary possibilities, for making music fuels the replication of life” (67). Robinson points out that musical genres such as “Indigenous hip-hop, rap, opera, throat boxing [...] assert the vibrancy of our cultures on a continuum with Indigenous tradition rather than a break from it. These contemporary genres carry our cultural knowledge into the present, as does [sic] throat singing or Cree hunting songs” (238). This article discusses this productive linkage of cultural tradition and contemporary music in three music videos that were produced as part of a Juneau-based community program for adolescents in 2018 and 2019.

The Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska are headed by a Central Council that reports to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. In July 2018, the Native Connections program of the Tlingit and Haida’s Tribal Family and Youth Services department offered “a week-long music video camp” which “focused on providing space for the youth to develop culturally-based social, emotional, mental, and spiritual skills to become healthy and resilient students. [...] Each youth participated in writing exercises to help create the lyrics and collaborated to develop the video’s aesthetic” (qtd. from description for “Spirit”; cf. *2018 Tlingit and Haida Annual Report* 49). Among the seven adolescents at the center of the music video (Jacob Brouillette, Marcel Cohen, Bradley Dybdahl, Arias Hoyle, Keegan Kanan, Geri Rodriguez, and Kenndra Willard), Arias Hoyle—who goes by the artist’s name of Air Jazz—stands out as the lead rapper. He started his own YouTube channel in 2014 and decided to become a hip-hop artist while still in high school (*Air Jazz*). In addition to being the central vocalist, Hoyle also raps, dances, acts, and moves with his rap-duo partner and (then) high-school buddy, Chris Talley, or with larger groups of people.

The three videos present hip hop as a community-building art form and as a purveyor of Tlingit and Haida cultural heritage, thus integrating hip hop’s so-called ‘fifth element’—knowledge—into a celebration of Indigeneity. This celebration is, I presume, immediately graspable by local/regional viewers familiar with this heritage. Moreover, as this article will argue, the videos enter into an implied conversation with non-Indigenous and non-Alaskan viewers who might encounter them on YouTube.

The lyrics and images mention and show locations which are recognizable to different degrees, depending on viewers’ familiarity with Juneau. What any viewer unmistakably realizes, however, is that these locales offer various kinds of interaction: shared experiences of learning and practicing traditions, and opportunities to create self-representations. The songs depict how people live and move within specific locations, and what this means to them. Physical sites are associated with beauty, with bountiful nature that nourishes body and soul, with spiritual experiences, and with a multi-generational and multi-ethnic community. Participating in Indigenous culture in Juneau, then, encompasses not only geographical and social settings but also multiple metaphorical

environments which fulfil specific functions. They elicit a range of responses, which cohere with ethnological and anthropological concepts such as “memoryscape,” “visionscape,” “culturescape,” and “taskscape” (Sejersen 74–82; cf. Nuttall 54). The language-based discourse as well as the visual and aural renderings of engaging with the Indigenous material culture and aesthetic heritage (such as appreciating art work and clothing, learning crafts, preparing food, dancing, and singing), all of which are brought together in rap lyrics and other elements of hip-hop performance, produce powerful examples of how the preservation of cultural knowledge coexists with contemporary and future-oriented adaptability and malleability.

The three music videos—“Ixsixán Ax Kwáan (I Love You My People),” “Zibit,” and “Spirit”—create a “both/and” aesthetic on multiple levels.<sup>1</sup> Their bilingual lyrics are, obviously, only fully comprehensible to speakers of Tlingit and English. Video footage of the performers in a broad range of environments provides impressions of Indigenous cultural practices and contemporary social situations through visually following the adolescent workshop participants. Significantly, the lyrics and images confront rather than privilege stereotypical ‘tourist’ perceptions. While the videos express the youths’ awareness of how non-Alaskans—like the author of this article or the approximately 6,000 daily visitors to Juneau during the cruise-ship season—might misperceive them, their cultural heritage, and their current lives, they vibrantly assert ancient and current local cultural practices, while playfully responding to outsiders’ ignorance and misconceptions. Thus, the videos foreground the youths’ Indigenous and local identity formation as the decisive contemporary “place”-defining element of Juneau.

The first song, “Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan (I Love You My People),” focuses on the adolescent performers’ love for family, community, language, and Indigenous culture. The song emphasizes that this living, contemporary, and bilingual culture successfully intertwines appreciation of history and tradition with participation in so-called mainstream culture and specifically in hip hop. The lyrics thus claim Juneau as a formative environment for the performers’ sense of self, and they put the city on the map of U.S. hip-hop culture.

The chorus—“I pick those blueberries / I love my Mom / I smoked a phat pound of salmon”—contains the song’s central strategic elements: references to the bountiful land and a declaration of love which echoes the innumerable references to mothers in hip-hop lyrics but may also celebrate the matrilineal Tlingit and Haida cultures, and the seventeen-year-old MC’s close-knit family. The third line refers back to the first verse: “I’m not smoking cannabis, this is just some salmon meat / You misunderstanding me[,] I do this one for family” (“Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan (I Love You My People)”). Family, here, goes beyond the nuclear family, and salmon links up with a specific tribal unit. As Hoyle emphasizes in the final section, he identifies as a member of a Tlingit subgroup called the “Chilkat” or “Salmon Cache Tribe,” an affiliation that he also highlights by naming his first full-length album, released on 6 January 2021, *Chill Out Chilkat* (Hoyle). Throughout the video, we

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the videos, see the works cited. A heartfelt shoutout of gratitude goes to recording artist Arias Hoyle who kindly emailed me the lyrics of the three songs and provided English translations for all of the Tlingit passages. Gunałchéesh (“thank you”), Arias!

see community members engaged in cutting up salmon and preparing it to be smoked. Thus, the entire song presents bountiful nature and community/family as attractive for the adolescent crew of performers. The pun on “phat”/“fat” expresses this appeal in a memorably homophonic nutshell. Using a term that originated in the early 1960s (“Phat, adjective”) and that is frequently used in hip hop provides a good example of how the videos promote the commensurability of traditional Indigenous cultural practices with contemporary popular-music self-expression.

The focus on the Southeast Alaska panhandle as a “culturescape” (Sejersen 81) is established by references to specific locations (Mendenhall Glacier, Juneau, Angoon, Hoonah, Kodiak), to Indigenous people (“Haida Tlingit folk,” “Tsimshian,” “raven and eagle people,” “T&H [i.e., Tlingit and Haida] in my DNA”), and to objects and activities (“totem,” “canoeing,” “drum,” “local native clothing regalia,” “hunting or fishing”). Hoyle playfully engages with hip-hop stereotypes when he refers to himself as a “Native gangster youth” and “basketball courter.” He connects the worlds of Alaskan tribal culture and of urban hip-hop culture, for example, in a string of assonances in the second verse: “Don’t ask to leave[,] we could basket *weave*, shoot basket *threes* / and practice *three* man *weave*[,] sounds *sweet*” (emphasis added; “Iḡsıxán, Aḡ Kḡwáan (I Love You My People)”). Traditional Indigenous crafts like basket weaving thus intersect with non-Indigenous contemporary sports like basketball, which is stereotypically associated with African American communities.

In addition to promoting shared heritage-oriented activities and an anti-drug message,<sup>2</sup> the lyrics assert Indigenous rights to the land and to cultural practice. Not only do they live “to the beat of our own drum,” but they stress that “this is our land, and it began / with just us, the same it’ll end (yeah)” (“Iḡsıxán, Aḡ Kḡwáan (I Love You My People)”). For the speaker, the art of writing and the act of expressing allegiance to his culture merge toward the end of the lyrics, which are written in Tlingit: he first thanks his pencil and then the similarly shaped, much larger totem pole. Thus, again, the individual artist casts himself as part of a community. The contemporary activity of writing hip-hop lyrics with a pencil is integrated into a sense of historical awareness: as Tlingit elder Judson Brown puts it, “totem poles were our history books. Unfortunately, the missionaries who came early on in the 1800s and the public officials thought that totem poles were our idols. They weren’t. They all told a story, usually of achievement or the overcoming of some obstacles” (qtd. in Nabokov 150).

Similar to Brown’s correction of non-Indigenous misconceptions regarding the functions of totem poles, the lyrics and the music video offer explicit explanations to non-local or non-Indigenous listeners and viewers. The very first line of the song reads: “Even though we’re Northwest[,] we still rep the Southeast” (“Iḡsıxán, Aḡ Kḡwáan (I Love You My

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<sup>2</sup> Besides the salmon-instead-of-cannabis motif, the lyrics and the video also play with the proverb of turning life’s lemons into lemonade by sporting the soft drink “Sprite lemon lime.” According to a self-description of Arias Hoyle and Chris Talley on a website that features Black Alaskan artists, they were both born to cocaine-using mothers, were adopted as infants, and grew up in multiethnic families (see “Chris Talley and Air Jazz”). In addition to the videos being produced by a youth-oriented community program, this personal background may have played a role in emphasizing an anti-drug message here.



People)”). This verse indicates the potential presence of a non-Alaskan audience from whose perspective Alaska is simply located in a hardly imaginable and remote “Northwest.” Relegating all of the state to the Northwest ignores that the ancestral lands of the Tlingit and Haida are part of the Southeast Alaska panhandle, which shares a North-South border with Canada. The song thus highlights the importance of one’s vantage point, which involves geographical positioning and cultural knowledge.

The second song, “Zibit,” picks up the juxtaposition of outside and inside perspectives on Indigenous culture in Juneau addressed in the first song. The lyrics poignantly contrast a tourist perspective on a local museum with the lived experience of local Indigenous people for whom the museum functions as a community center that represents their history, cosmology, art, and current cultural practices. The single-word title playfully zips the word “exhibit” into two syllables, possibly to highlight the incomplete tourist perspective. On a more practical level, “Zibit” fits neatly into the rhythmic pattern of the hook, which is sung by Chris Talley:

Welcome to the Zibit (2x)  
Got killer whale  
Eagle bear  
Raven form! Go ribbit!  
Welcome to the Zibit (2x)  
At first you buy a ticket  
And then ya gonna live it.

The exhibit referenced here is located in a building owned by the Sealaska Corporation, one of the Indigenous governing bodies that resulted from the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The lyrics depict the exhibit as a site of lived heritage, not as a dusty collection of items belonging to an ostensibly long-gone past. The first verse merges heritage and modernity in presenting the Indigenous “culturescape” as a “memoryscape,” “taskscape,” and “visionscape” (to quote Sejersen again). Sonically, this is conveyed through assonance:

Transforming *our house*  
into a *powwow*  
with *surround sound*  
chant it *loud*  
dancing *downtown*. (my emphasis)

The urban environment of Juneau provides an important canvas for Tlingit and Haida cultural learning and living. The lyrics refer to Juneau with its Tlingit name (“Dzánti K’ihéeni”) and ascribe more power to Indigenous culture than to Christianity in this location; they celebrate artefacts such as “Lingít blankets” (which are passed down from one generation to the next) and totem poles (whose cultural centrality is also mentioned in “Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan,” as we have seen). The song also includes shoutouts to Tlingit leader Walter Soboleff (1908–2011), Tsimshian Alaskan artist David Boxley (b. 1952), and “latséen shaawát ([...] our strong women)” (“Zibit”). Non-Alaskans are playfully mocked for their presumed lack of familiarity with Alaskan history, leaders, contemporary culture, and social structures.

More extensively than the first video, “Zibit” accentuates a stereotypical tourist perspective. Outside the exhibition building, we repeatedly discern massive cruise ships whose temporary residents will—by implication—‘take in’ Juneau during a one-day visit. Inside the Sealaska Corporation building, the fast-moving camera hurriedly pans across wall displays of carved artefacts. Assuming the visual perceptions of a tourist who simply rushes through the exhibit, the lyrics imagine someone—presumably a non-Indigenous, non-Alaskan visitor without the requisite cultural and historical knowledge—who perceives the exhibited masks and animal shapes as “quite scary,” “like [a] messy collage,” and a “desert mirage.” Fearing another culture’s aesthetics and its cosmological origins (“scary”), dismissing an assemblage of artefacts of an unknown culture as looking disorganized (“messy”), and regarding such cultures as unreal or deceptive (“mirage”): such prejudices and preconceptions have been rampant within white-majority settler populations, and Indigenous artists are often confronted with them. In the same ironic spirit, the lyrics characterize Indigenous clothing as “pageantable” and as sporting “beautiful Gucci otter.” These emblematic references to a folksy pageant outfit and a glamorous fashion label possibly allude to expectations of Indigenous exoticism and picturesqueness, and to a long history of (ab-)using local resources for non-local luxury items. Otter fur, in particular, conjures up the fur trade as an example of exploiting natural resources to extinction. In the song, outsiders’ assumed deficit of knowledge about Alaskan history and culture is neither restricted to day tourists nor to past events. It is also ascribed to persons in power such as the United States president, whose ignorance should be punished, the speaker suggests, by restricting him to a “smaller oval office.” More seriously, the lyrics juxtapose the positively connoted Indigenous “clan” with racist “klansmen” whose efforts to undermine Indigenous culture and interethnic harmony must be offset by fostering both.

Despite the title, the video does not solely show the “Zibit” which pays homage to ancestors and historical personages. The museum simultaneously figures as a locale of cultural learning in the present. The video footage of multiethnic groups in the building highlights people who dance, work on crafts, and otherwise engage in community activities centered around shared material and cultural practices. Another element that goes beyond the exhibit is that Arias Hoyle intones some verses outside. He performs in urban-looking sections of Juneau that have an infrastructure, buildings, and monuments. For instance, he is repeatedly shown sitting on an immense wooden “Welcome to Juneau” structure located at the port for cruise ships. Other parts of the performance are set in decidedly non-urban sections of Juneau that emphasize the beauty of (ostensibly or relatively) untouched nature. Despite its small number of residents, the municipality of Juneau is geographically larger than some of the smallest of the contiguous forty-eight states and features natural environments like high mountains, bodies of water, and glaciers. Besides observing Hoyle outside the Sealaska Corporation building, we also see Talley singing the chorus of “Zibit” both in a sound studio and in a mountainous landscape. The visual impression that the video creates is that neither the artists nor their community members are ‘stuck in a museum.’ They move and perform inside and outside, interacting with multiple generations and ethnicities. Furthermore, the seemingly

ephemeral outside performance is counteracted by showing Talley in a recording studio, highlighting that the song is archived for repeated listening/viewing and that some of the performers have professional artistic aspirations.

The lyrics of the third song and video, “Spirit,” connect with the first two songs by addressing the challenging pursuit of Indigenous identity in the contemporary moment. Reminiscent of earlier references to Indigenous cosmology, this song explores ways of connecting with Tlingit concepts of spirituality and—as in the second song—depicts the main singer in relation to Indigenous artefacts. The nearly exclusively Tlingit lyrics characterize language as a crucial channel for accessing Indigenous spirituality. The closing of “Spirit” returns to motifs introduced in the first song, especially community coherence and connectedness to the local environment. In fact, the adolescent performers indicate that they adopted the first song’s title as their group name: “Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan.”

As explained in the information posted underneath the YouTube video, a person’s Indigenous name links them with their ancestors and encourages them to respect long-standing values in order to pass them on to posterity. The song thus dramatizes Hoyle’s conversation with his tribal spirit, as indicated by repeated references to his Indigenous name, “Yawdunéi.” The phrases that he speaks do not form a clearly coherent text. They rather read like sentences that a language learner might use to practice idiomatic expressions, as the English translations added here in parentheses indicate. When the spirit reassures him that everything is fine although he is struggling with the language, he responds with “Xát yanéekw! (I’m sick)” and (only in English): “I can’t even speak fluently!” Before the last hook, however, the speaker thanks his spirit and goes on to assert his selfhood and his participation in Indigenous culture, when he claims that “Lingít Yoo x’atángi wooch.éen / Ká latséen (Tlingit language is / togetherness and strength)” (“Spirit”). By implication, mastering his Indigenous tongue provides both healing and community.

At the end of the lyrics, the land is given center stage, referring back to the assertion of Indigenous ownership of their territory in “Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan”:

Áasgatu Xóodzi / (Forest Bear)  
Dzantík’ihéeni / (Flounders’ creek)  
Ax aani áyá / (This land is my land)  
Í aani áyá / (This land is your land)  
Ldakát heew.aan (Everybody)  
Du aani (Their land).

The “forest bear” possibly emblemizes wildlife in the Tongass National Forest, which surrounds Juneau. “Dzantík’ihéeni / (Flounders’ creek)” (“Spirit”) is the Tlingit place name for Juneau. This Indigenous designation provides an alternative to naming places after notorious gold diggers like the Quebecois Joe Juneau. The poignant hint at Woody Guthrie’s classic American folk song “This Land Is Your Land,” which has assumed the quality of a national anthem (Butler 5), further pits settler-colonial and Indigenous notions of land ownership and connectedness against one another. More importantly, performing a Tlingit version of the central lines from a perennially popular song that, more often than not, is used to express allegiance and belonging to “America” comes across as a powerful signal of self-assertiveness. One could imagine that, if “Spirit” were

to become more broadly known, it would spark controversies comparable to the heated debate about singing the national anthem in a language other than English (Garrett 1–4). By referring to specific locations with their Tlingit names and by claiming these locations for the Indigenous community, the lyrics confirm the decolonializing impetus of learning about Tlingit culture. According to an Indigenous understanding of “land as pedagogy” (Simpson, “Land”), such a learning process entails reciprocal land–human interaction and ascribes agentic power to the land.

“Spirit” connects with the previous two songs not only thematically but also through sonic and visual similarities. It thus contributes to a sense of closure and of coherence across the three music videos. Reminiscent of “Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan (I Love You My People),” which opens with the sound of Indigenous drumming, “Spirit” begins with tribal music—in this case, a chant. Images of local youths and of a mountainous landscape accompany this opening sequence. The lyrics focus on the lyrical I’s conversation with his own tribal spirit. Parts of the video juxtapose Hoyle’s voice with a vocoded ‘spirit voice’ and depict the interlocutors as two head-shaped silhouettes facing one another on either side of an Indigenous work of art, which depicts the world-transforming trickster figure of a raven. Yet the video also shows the main singer in company with others, moving with them, performing for them, and experiencing community with them inside and outside. This embeddedness of the metaphysical spirit dialogue within a materially/physically rooted context of social interaction may have been inspired by “the verbal genre known to folklorists as *memorate*—narratives of personal encounters with the supernatural that become part of family or even community folklore” (Nabokov 106). Visually stressing the importance of social context, the end of the music video shows a bird’s eye view of youths lying on the ground in a pattern that forms the letters “I A K” (“Ixsixán, Ax Kwáan (I Love You My People)”). The camera’s lofty distance from and perspective on humans and their environment playfully keeps the spiritual subtext in view. Ultimately, “I A K” does not only display the name of the group and reference the title of the first video, but it also pithily summarizes the incentive of the entire project: to awaken and strengthen love for Indigenous history, culture, and identity within the adolescent workshop participants, and to encourage a positive sense of self alongside community coherence.

## Concluding Remarks

Hip-hop scholars have pointed out that throughout the world rap music has become instrumental in strengthening local communities, their cultural affiliation, and their pride in their respective languages. Practices such as sampling have also encouraged artists to mix musical elements and visual components of their own cultures with the transnational aesthetics of hip hop (see, for instance, Verán 337). Imani Perry argues that one of the communication elements that resists white supremacy and co-optation has been the self-conscious incomprehensibility of hip hop lyricism. Rappers are misunderstood, both intentionally and unintentionally, not only as a side effect of the fact that we rely on figurative pidgins in the United States to cross borders in popular culture; but incomprehensibility is also a protective strategy. (511)

Here, Perry refers to lyrical and linguistic opaqueness within the English language. The experience of watching and listening to the three music videos discussed in this article invites an expansion of Perry’s inquiry. What happens when bilingual hip hop is heard by listeners who only understand one of the two languages? And how can a non-Tlingit speaker respond to the third song which only features two English phrases: “I can’t even speak fluently” and “Very sorry” (“Spirit”)? Importantly, “Spirit” provides audible access to a language that is not everyday fare when it comes to hip hop and to mainstream experiences in the United States, let alone in Europe. Beyond that, the focus on Tlingit fits into the intense local rootedness of the triad of songs/videos. What better culmination for a program of cultural immersion could be imagined? The same can be said of Hoyle’s Tlingit-language music video “Latseen áyá xát (Strong One)” which he co-created in the summer of 2019 “in partnership with Tlingit and Haida Central Council, the University of Alaska Southeast, SHI, and the students enrolled in the Latseen Academy” (qtd. from description for “Latseen áyá xát (Strong One)”). Simpson and Cajete would, presumably, applaud all opportunities for local youth to learn from/in their home environment and to express their cultural knowledge in their Indigenous tongue, thus shaking off some of the fetters of depending on English. For viewers who cannot understand Tlingit, however, the verbal meaning cannot be accessed by the visuals alone, so that such viewers are left to work with the song title and the above-quoted phrases about the speaker’s struggle with language competency. To my mind, this is a fruitfully humbling experience that will hopefully inspire respect for the bilingual Indigenous community and the adolescents’ engagement with their heritage.

The triad of music videos can, thus, be profitably read in light of Zapf’s “cultural ecology,” which acknowledges the coexistence and even celebration of “connectivity *and* diversity, relationality *and* difference” (138). As in Hutcheon’s concept of “postmodern *both/and* thinking” (139), the youths participating in the music video camp represent themselves as decidedly bilingual in a culture that is both current and ancient: a culture that encompasses Indigenous heritage, the colonization of Alaska, and the twenty-first-century present of the Sealaska Corporation and the United States. The future envisioned here asserts the values of family and community in all of their diversity. While I am grateful to have been granted access to an English translation of the Tlingit lyrics, I would like to emphasize how important it must have been for the adolescent performers to assert exclusively in Tlingit that “(Tlingit language is / togetherness and strength)” (“Spirit”) without any aural disruption by lyrics sung in English—disruption in the sense that it would privilege outsiders and not foreground the community-building and empowering functions of Tlingit for the artists and the main addressees.

The central elements of “explorative dialogic interplay” (Zapf 144) in the music videos discussed here are taken from contrasting Indigenous and non-Indigenous, or Alaskan and non-Alaskan, knowledges. The conversation between and among different cultural inputs in these hip-hop lyrics and videos, then, relies on Indigenous “cosmopolitanism” (Aplin, “Get Tribal” 114). The visuals make clear that Juneau is a multi-ethnic place; they also demonstrate how the integration of multiple origins can be achieved under the cultural umbrella of specific Indigenous affiliations and dedication to

the local multi-ethnic community. In Hoyle’s case, his afro and his dark skin tone bespeak his African American heritage as much as some of his outfits bespeak his Tlingit heritage. Chris Talley’s presence and performance also confirm that Black artists are part and parcel of local Juneau culture.

Beyond this, the videos characterize Indigeneity as a model of appreciating one’s environment and of seeking to find a balanced, healthy way of life therein (while being acutely aware of less healthy options that threaten large swaths of Alaskan society). Thus, “Iᵗsᵗixán, Ax Kwáan” verbally and visually presents cultural knowledge ranging from taking in specific environments (for instance, by canoeing, as in the opening scene) to enjoying the offerings of the local flora (as emphasized in the blueberry-picking segment) and fauna (as shown through the salmon-smoking event) and to appreciating family and community (as highlighted by the reference to the MC’s mother and to the significance of family in general). The videos of “Zibit” and “Spirit” subsequently elaborate on some of these elements. They add historical consciousness and further cultural practices, such as language proficiency, spiritual beliefs, traditional crafts, dancing, and contemporary art.

At the outset, I discussed Hutcheon’s critique of modernity’s normative incentives as well as musicologists’ discussion of contemporary Indigenous music as transcending white settler-colonial notions of Indigeneity, i.e., notions that relegate Indigenous art to the past and to immutable ‘tradition.’ Reducing Indigenous self-expression to necessarily centering around the rejection of such stereotypes is deficient as well, as Trevor Reed finds: “So much of what we see as Indigenous musical modernity may come across as resistance to settler-colonialism, yet how can we be certain we truly understand all that is happening in modern Indigenous sonic spaces?” (259). I certainly cannot claim fully to understand the verbal and non-verbal sound-related Tlingit elements of the three videos, but the capacious eclecticism of hip hop as well as the paratextual information posted on YouTube provide enough access to grasp the trajectory of the songs. The youth project’s videos intertwine Indigenous traditions and survival in the present, assert the sustenance received through their sense of belonging and through linguistic and cultural practices, and express the inspiration they derived from their Indigenous heritage.

This inspiration also thrives in the varieties of hip hop that the lead rappers of these videos mobilize in their subsequent work. In 2020, Hoyle and Talley’s performances and recordings as “Radiophonic Jazz” were part of the virtual art exhibition “Black Alaskan Art Matters.” Here the duo defined their approach as “Zen Hop” which brings together hip hop, Indigenous sonic worlds, and Asian musical elements. Embedded within their experiences as mixed-race Black men in Alaska, they characterize their music as “an expression of our hope for the future” (“Chris Talley and Air Jazz”). This hope confirms Simpson’s notion of Indigenous peoples’ “collective resurgence” from the centuries-long impact of settler-colonialism and towards re-establishing “complex, layered, multidimensional, intimate relationships with human and non-human beings” (“Indigenous” 23). The required process involves “Indigenous peoples standing up on our lands in a principled, strategic and articulate way, embodying change” rather than “relying on victim narratives” (31).

While Simpson addresses political activism, music videos like the ones discussed in this article can similarly encourage change and proclaim a site-centered sense of self. As Zapf argues, understanding literary texts from the vantage point of cultural ecology draws attention to the multiple “discursive modes” that these texts accommodate: (a) “culture-critical metadiscourse,” (b) “imaginative counter-discourse,” and (c) “reintegrative interdiscourse” (147–48). Zapf ascribes these modes to fiction, but this article has shown that they also occur in rap poetry and music videos: the three songs (a) critique clichés about hip hop as much as clichés about Alaska and Indigenous people; (b) they offer creative alternatives that foreground the relations among place, cultural heritage, language, and intergenerational community-building; and (c) their bilingualism and their accessibility on YouTube indicate the artists’ confidence in the impact that their take on hip hop might have—both on/in their community and on/in the performing arts. While the youths who participated in the workshop did not necessarily all plan a career in popular music, this confidence is vindicated by Arias Hoyle’s projects and career as a recording artist. The songs he released in 2021 allude to a broad range of cultures across the planet. He recently also collaborated with Indigenous artists in Hawaii, thus emphasizing a cosmopolitan perspective on Indigeneity.

What, then, could be the future of studying Alaskan Indigenous hip hop within an ecocritical framework? Most of all, generalizations should be carefully avoided. Instead, more research on individual artists and works in relation to specific locations would be useful. It will be necessary to discuss in more depth the functions of bilingualism as well as the present and historical dimensions of Indigenous cultures. Scholars also need to consider the expressive options that unfold in the intermedial synergies of rap poetry and music video aesthetics. Since specific environments of producing, distributing, and accessing such hip hop must be studied in detail, dialog with artists and scholars in Alaska is equally desirable. For me, this article is just the beginning.

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