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How Native American rappers communicate and create a modern identity

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Current research concerning identity and Native Americans is sparse outside the realm of expressly Native American scholarship. While most conversations about identity and Native Americans focuses on historical and political aspects, many sources do not explore alternative avenues of contemporary identity creation. This thesis uses Kenneth Burke's pentad to analyze the lyrics for "AbOriginal" by Frank Waln. The pentad is used to analyze each line of the rap. A new term, alter-agent, is used to identify agents who the agent either associates with or who the agent views as hindering his progress. There is then a count of the number of occurrences of each element of the pentad throughout the lyrics in order to determine the pentadic ratio of the song. The findings of this analysis show that Frank Waln communicates identity in "AbOriginal" using an act-agent ratio, which relies on a mixture of realism and idealism. Most rap songs will also show an act-agent ratio since rap tends to rely on rapper persona when communicating ideas. Further research should occur using Burke's pentad, with the addition of the term "alter-agent" to analyze other works in terms of identity.

How Native American rappers communicate and create a modern identity

Introduction

As a third generation, mixed-race Native American, I have first-hand experience with the struggle to find modern, relatable representations of Native Americans within media and society. A micro-inquiry that I performed in a research methods class showed that Native American students at James Madison University also found it difficult to name Native Americans that are present in media and society (Berge, 2016). The micro-inquiry, along with my personal experience, drives my interest in modern Native American identity. In this thesis, I will further explore the theme of identity by looking at how identity is communicated through rap music. I will use the term “Native American” to refer to “Native peoples indigenous to the United States who self-identify as Native American” (Garrett and Pitchette, 2000, 4). This includes people who are enrolled in a federally recognized tribe, as well as people who are not enrolled in a tribe but who still identify as Native American and have immediate family members who are Native American. The research in this thesis will explore Native American identity through Native American rap.

Defining Native American

It is difficult to define Native American, as most definitions will inevitably leave out groups of people who believe that they are Native American or deserve to be recognized as such. In this thesis, “Native American” will not refer to people who have tenuous connections to Native Americans within their family and who mention distant

Native relatives when it is advantageous and convenient for them. This is to reduce the issues that arise from individuals who self-identify as Native American only when it suits their purposes (Springwood, 2004).

While setting the parameters for what makes someone a Native American may seem simple (i.e., using the blood quantum measure), using “blood percentage” as the sole indicator of Native American identity is a contested method (Strong and Winkle, 1996). The blood quantum measure essentially distills identity into the percentage of one’s ancestors who are documented as full-blood Native Americans. One of the major issues that arises from this method of categorizing individuals is the “one drop” issue—an individual may have enough “Native blood” to be considered “not white” by mainstream society, but not have enough “Native blood” for tribal communities to view him/her as a Native American.

Stereotypes, Lack of Representation, and Identity

So much of what American society believes to be Native American identity comes from grade school lessons on Plains Indians and from representations of Indians within mainstream media (think: *Little Big Man*, *Pocahontas*, and *The Last Mohican*). Media representations of Native Americans tend to portray them in a purely historical fashion, wearing buckskin clothing and feather headdresses. While researching Native American identity creation, I found that sources tend to use a historical/poli-historical lens, as opposed to use an ethnographic or psychological approach to exploring Native American identity. My curiosity formed in the gap.

Do Native Americans today communicate and create their identities through largely historical/poli-historical discourses? Although plenty of academic sources focus on the historical aspect of Native American identity, other avenues of identity communication and creation should be explored. It is a disservice to take an entire population and reduce it to its historical significance. Doing so leaves the modern population wondering who they are in the modern world. While other populations have a plethora of representations to show many different aspects of identity, such as African Americans who have individuals who range from the social reformer Frederick Douglass to the pop music sensation, Beyoncé and even recently, President Barack Obama, or white Americans who have individuals who range from the automobile inventor, Henry Ford, to all of the country's presidents (excluding President Obama), to any number of musical artists, Native Americans largely have historical figures who mainstream society has assigned to represent them, such as Pocahontas, Geronimo, or Sitting Bull.

However, Native American communities have likely found other means for communicating identity. Contemporary musicians, specifically rappers, fill a unique position. Rap, as we know it in the United States, came from the African American community and has traditionally communicated aspects of African American identity that the community did not think was being portrayed in typical channels throughout society (Sheffield, 2011). By drawing on rap as a means to communicate alternative identity, my thesis seeks to examine how Native American rappers communicate identity through word choice, themes, and specific instrumental techniques. I will situate the question within the traditional use of music to communicate identity within the Native American community.

Throughout the research, I will reference cultural identity, collective identity, and individual identity. Social constructs have a major impact on identity creation at any level (“What is social construction?” 1999). I believe individual identity is composed of cultural identity and collective identity and so, when Native American rappers communicate identity, whether it is cultural or collective or individual, they are capable of affecting how individuals who listen to them create their own identity. I am interested in discovering how Native American rappers communicate modern and collective cultural identity through their raps. My rhetorical analysis seeks to highlight the modern Native American identity that is found in popular Native American rap music, in order to draw attention to an identity that lacks representation in popular media.

Literature Review

While it would be unwise to attempt to distill an entire population, composed of numerous different tribes, into one identity, for the sake of scope, I will address Native American identity through recurring themes or generalizations of identity. I will not limit my research to one tribe, either, because exploring the communication of identity by Native Americans is important for all Native Americans (Garrett and Pichette, 2000; Horse, 2005; Strong and Winkle, 1996). By limiting the research to one tribe, I fear others will take the research as only being useful to one tribe.

Human identity both informs and is informed by human behavior. The way we act lets others know who we are and, we act the way we do because of who we are—behavior and identity are intertwined. Kenneth Burke’s (1969a) pentad for rhetorical analysis: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose, is a nuanced method for exploring the

basis of human behavior. Since there are many different factors that influence identity creation (Horse, 2005, 61), Burke's pentad will be helpful for analyzing these different factors. By identifying the what/where/who/how/why in Native American rap, this research will describe the means by which Native American rappers communicate identity and what that identity looks like.

Burke's concept of identification (1969b) is also important when discussing identity in rhetoric (Clark, 1997). Since identification deals with the way in which an agent situates him/herself within a given environment, who the agent associates with and the motive, the term is beneficial for identifying when and how an agent is associating with another agent or group. Clark discusses "the experience of sociality" as "one of shifting identifications" (2). Identification, then, becomes the foundation of social life. People communicate who they are mainly through their language and their actions. Language is how people communicate their thoughts, intents, and identity to others (Kraus and Chiu, 1997). A rhetorical analysis of the language employed in a rap song will be useful for examining identity.

While modern Native Americans are different from their ancestors, their identity is still informed by the past (Clark and Sharri, 1997). Some Native American rappers reflect this influence by including aspects of traditional Native American music within their songs. J. Bryan Burton offers a brief overview of the traditional uses of Native American music. Burton catalogues the different instances for traditional Native American music, such as work songs, social songs, religious ceremonies, healing ceremonies, courtship, storytelling, war songs, and songs for success in hunting and agriculture. Already it is clear that traditional Native American music served many

purposes, most of which appear to be functional rather than recreational. Songs for healing, religious purposes, working, war, or success in endeavors show that the music was meant to facilitate or accompany an activity as opposed to music for the sake of music or music to pass the time. Most people recognize the drum as a traditional instrument and Burton mentions that, “Many tribes consider the drum to represent the heartbeat of Mother Earth and to offer a means of communication with the supernatural. Because of this significance, tribes often establish strict protocols for playing the drum” (n.d.). The drum, then, is significant both for the sound of the music but also for the cultural identity. I hope that by looking for aspects of traditional Native American music within Native American rap, my analysis of identity communication will be more complete. Although my analysis seeks to emphasize modern Native American identity rather than historical Native American identity, I cannot ignore the importance of historical identity within the broader Native American community.

Neal Ullestad discusses contemporary Native American music and identity within the framework of ethnomusicology and identity politics (2006). Ullestad examines how some artists blend traditional music with contemporary music in an effort to address their sense of place, as well as engage their listeners. By combining elements of traditional music with those of contemporary music in order to achieve a goal, Native American artists are using their music functionally to address issues, communicate identity, and reconcile different aspects of themselves and their communities.

Since music has historically been used by Native Americans for functional purposes, rap music fills a similar role in a contemporary setting. My rhetorical analysis focuses on contemporary music, specifically rap, because rap communicates alternative

identities for populations. Carrie Louise Sheffield (2011) discusses Native American hip-hop¹ and how it is specifically used within Native American reservations. Sheffield (2011) mentions that American popular media, through “artificial representations of Native American identity and history, redefine Native Americans as simplistic and failing stereotypes that further erode Native American self-confidence and identity” (p. 95). Since American popular media fails to portray Native Americans in a complete way, Native Americans seek other outlets for accurate representation of their identity. Again, rap is used as a vehicle for a subversive discourse. When popular media only portrays one aspect of an identity for a population, the population will seek to create other forms of media that reflect an identity that is more relatable. Creating an alternative media that reflects a relatable identity is a move that seeks to create a positive image for the community (Sheffield, 2011, p. 101).

This research seeks to uncover how Native American rappers communicate identity and subsequently, what that identity looks like. As I mentioned earlier, identity and behavior are intertwined. We can also say that environment influences behavior (Dawkins, 2006). The lack of relatable or accurate representations of modern Native Americans in popular American media creates an environment for Native Americans that is not conducive to positive self-esteem. Scientific data for Native Americans is scarce when it comes to the study of identity creation (Leavitt, 2015). A lack of diverse representations of Native Americans in media influences how they perceive themselves and how they make their identities. Under-representation of Native Americans results in a

¹ While today, hip-hop and rap are conflated and grouped together, hip-hop has traditionally been a type of culture to which rap belongs (Shaw, 2013).

lack of “identity prototypes,” or instances of Native Americans that they can perceive, analyze, and perhaps use when creating their own identities (Leavitt, 2015). Since most media portrayals of Native Americans are either historical or stereotypical, it can lead to an act referred to as “self-stereotyping,” where Native Americans begin to view themselves as stereotypes or act in ways that reflect the stereotypes that they see. With a lack of diverse representation within media, Native Americans may have few examples to reference when creating their identities (Horse, 2005). It would be dishonest to claim that media does not play a role in identity creation or to underestimate the power of positive and diverse representations within media.

Within writing and rhetoric scholarship, Robert Yagelski contributes to the conversation about Native American rhetoric (1995). By exploring the discourse between the Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, and the governor of Indiana, William Henry Harrison, Yagelski draws attention to the way Native American rhetoric changed and adapted to an environment that was dominated by white settlers. Yagelski’s identification of Native American rhetoric as a “tool for political struggle and cultural survival” (65) contributes to the analysis of rap lyrics in terms of identity. Cultural survival is important to the individual and his/her identity because the culture is the foundation for the individual’s identity. When a dominant culture threatens the existence of a non-dominant culture, it is beneficial for the individual to find ways to ensure the survival of his/her culture.

I would also like to note that there are many great Native American scholars who have done research on “narratives of dominance” (Gerald Vizenor, 1999), the dominant culture’s construction of Native American identity (Luana Ross, 1998), and the rhetorics of survivance (Malea Powell, 2002). These sources will contribute to my understanding

of the different facets of Native American identity. The Native American author, Sherman Alexie, has also contributed to understanding Native American identity through his novels and screenplays about Native American life. There are also many scholars who have researched Native American identity through writing (Holly L. Baumgartner, 2006; Ashley Gordon, 2015; David Russell Margolin, 1999). The scholarship that surrounds Native American identity and music or writing is robust.

Methods

I am studying rap because rap has historically been used to communicate alternative or non-dominant discourses (Sheffield, 2011). I will perform a Burkean rhetorical analysis of lyrics from one rap song, “AbOriginal,” by Frank Waln. I will analyze “AbOriginal” because out of the five songs I was considering for analysis, which were chosen based on song and artist popularity, “AbOriginal” focuses the most on identity. I selected “AbOriginal” for this analysis because the subject matter revolves around identity and issues with identity. The lyrics are rich in the different facets of identity, specifically in the tensions and subtleties of creating an identity when an individual exists between two communities. I am choosing Kenneth Burke’s (1969a) pentad for my rhetorical analysis because Burke’s pentad is a basis for analyzing and interpreting language and its connection to behavior and identity. While some have made the case for the pentad to be a hexad (Anderson, 2010) with the sixth element being attitude, I am choosing to use the pentad and contain attitude within agent and act.

The first step in this pentadic analysis is to identify the elements of the pentad that are present in each line of the rap (Higgins, 1986). The second step is to refine the

elements, since Waln's rap contains metaphors that need to be unpacked in order to examine the multiple meanings of the phrases. The following step involves listening to and identifying the musical elements of the song and determining their significance given their placement. Next, the pentadic elements of the lyrics are counted and totaled in order to determine the pentadic ratio (Higgins, 1986). Finally, by considering all of the layers of the analysis, I will discuss how these layers work together to create identity. There are multiple layers to this analysis of Waln's rap and hopefully, the layers will help parse out the complexities of communicating and creating identity.

Burke's Pentad

The Burkean analysis will use Burke's pentad of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (1969a, p. xv). I will apply the pentad equally to each lyric that I analyze and determine how each line fulfills the different parts of the pentad. The "act" will be what took place within the rap (ex: The man stole the book). The "scene" will be the situation in which the act occurred (ex: She went to the grocery store). The "agent" will be who is performing the act (ex: The police officer was very upset). "Agency" will refer to the means by which the agent completed the act (ex: He confessed to what he had done in order to stay with her). Finally, "purpose" will be the motive for the act (ex: In order to avoid detection, the woman disguised herself before she went out).

Another concept of Burke's that is important to recall for lyrical analysis is the concept of terministic screens (1966). Burke defines terministic screen as, "a screen composed of terms through which humans perceive the world, and that direct attention away from some interpretations and toward others" (1966). He further explains

terministic screens by saying, “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent must function also as a deflection of reality” (1966). While an argument could be made that most speech is an example of a terministic screen because whichever word we choose to communicate an idea necessarily emphasizes one aspect of an idea over a different aspect, song lyrics uniquely exemplify the concept of the terministic screen. Since the song writer ostensibly has limitations on his/her song, such as length and if the lyrics flow with the music, the writer has to choose the words even more carefully than a writer of dramatic works. A dramatist may have limitations on his/her work, as well, but there is undeniably more space to communicate in a dramatic work than in a song. For this pentadic analysis, the words the rapper has chosen to convey an idea are incredibly important.

Pentadic Ratios

Burke (1945) explains that there are ten ratios for the pentad: scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agency, agent-purpose, agent-agency, and agency-purpose (15). I will find the ratio of “AbOriginal” by performing a number count of the pentadic elements in the song. The ratio comes from analyzing the frequency of the elements and determining which two elements are most prevalent.

These ratios give us the “principles of determination,” or the purpose of the rhetoric. Each term in the pentad has a corresponding philosophical ideology associated with it: act corresponds with realism, scene corresponds with materialism, agent corresponds with idealism, agency corresponds with pragmatism, and purpose

corresponds with mysticism (128). The pentadic ratios examine the relationships between the elements and how they expose motives within rhetoric. If the dominant ratio is that of scene-agent, the underlying philosophies of the rhetoric would be materialism and idealism.

Alter-Agent

When I applied the pentad to the lyric analysis, I found that the term “agent” did not completely fulfill its purpose. Since “agent” was insufficient, I tried to figure out a way to identify the elements of the lyrics that would accurately describe their purpose. Initially, co-agent was a term that I considered; however, the prefix co- was incorrect. The other agents in the lyrics are not always communicated as being equal with the agent, nor are their acts always beneficial or complementary. Burke discusses how terms such as “co-agent” or “counter-agent” may be useful to identify when a character is complementary to the agent (such as a friend to the agent) or when one is detrimental, in the case of villains or enemies (1969a, p. xix).

This thesis is not analyzing a dramatic work in the traditional sense, but instead is analyzing rap lyrics and how they correspond to identity, so I opted to employ a new term: alter-agent. Alter-agent encompasses both co-agents and counter-agents, but instead of pitting them as opposing forces who exist solely in relation to the agent, “alter-agent” allows for them to exist on their own while still interacting with and influencing the agent. This is not to say that co-agent and counter-agent could not be used for the same text but that, for the purpose of analyzing this text in terms of how an agent creates an identity, specifically an agent from a non-dominant community, employing a new term is

more beneficial. Alter-agent takes the place of co-agent and counter-agent in this analysis because alter-agent allows for a non-valued identification of other agents throughout the text. In fact, because this thesis analyzes a Native American text, creating a new term seeks to give space to Native American expression by modifying the Western/European vantage point of the pentad to allow for a method of analyzing text for identity that embraces Native American rhetoric.

Identification.

Burke's principle of identification states that an individual is associated with, identifies with, an individual from a different group insofar as their interests are the same. The first individual is still very much a unique person and are not the same person as the second individual (1969b). Identification could have been used to analyze this text but I chose not to use it in favor of employing the new term, alter-agent. Creating identity is a nuanced and complex matter. Burke's principle of identification covers many aspects of identity creation, namely the manner in which an individual associates him/herself with another individual or group based on shared interests.

For the purpose of analyzing an identity that includes existing within and without of different communities, alter-agent becomes useful. Because the term does not include inherent value judgements about the nature of the agent it is describing (such as with co- and counter-), and because it does not seek to necessarily place the agent in a position of associating or not associating with a given individual or group (such as with identification), the term allows for a malleable and conversant discussion of the creation of contemporary Native American identity. Rather than positioning other agents and the

agent as opposing or supporting forces, and as either/or, “alter-agent” allows for both-at-once.

Following the lyric analysis, I will discuss the implications of alter-agents. Since alter-agent is not a traditional element in Burke’s pentad, I will explain the importance of it and why it is a useful term for analyzing identity. When counting the elements in the song, second-person plural pronouns, such as “us” and “we,” are counted twice—once for agent and once for alter-agent.

Music Analysis

When the artist uses music to bolster his/her message, music becomes an alter-agent. Music acts as both a tool of the artist to communicate a message, as well as an aspect of the artist. The music supports the artist/agent’s identity. When the artist relegates music to a background role, the music will act as scene. The consideration of instruments will be brief, only pertaining to whether or not traditional Native American instruments are used. Since this research involves music, the rhetorical analysis will make use of ethnomusicology, as well. Ethnomusicology is the study of music in its cultural context (“What is ethnomusicology?” 2016).

To reiterate, the different components of the analysis include: The Burkean pentad, musical instruments, and finally, rapper persona. The research will then bring all components together in order to explore how Native American rappers communicate identity. The conclusion of the research will focus on the connection between Native American rapper identity and the modern collective and cultural identity of Native Americans.

To limit the scope of the research, I will only select one rapper and one song. My research will not involve more than one rapper in order to allow depth of analysis, thus enriching the impact of my final conclusion. I selected Frank Waln based on his popularity and exposure within Native American communities. I determined popularity by performing Internet searches for “popular” or “well-known” Native American rappers and comparing results between the top searches. I also considered the frequency that an artist’s name appears throughout different sources.

Frank Waln has won three Native American Music Awards, the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development 2014 Native American 40 under 40, and the 2014 Chicago Mayor’s Award for Civic Engagement (Waln, n.d.). He has been featured on USA Today, MTV’s “Rebel Music Native America,” ESPN, and BuzzFeed’s “12 Native Americans Who Are Making A Difference” (2014). Waln was a recipient of the Gates Millennium Scholarship and attended Columbia College Chicago, where he earned his B.A. in Audio Arts and Acoustics. He has written for *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* and *The Guardian*.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A rhetorical analysis seeks to examine the parts of a text and determine how those parts join together to create a certain effect or achieve a purpose. I will conduct this analysis through a close-reading of the lyrics, using the Burkean pentad. I will present the Burkean pentad analysis in a qualitative table to identify the parts of the pentad and how frequently they occur throughout the lyrics. In addition to the rhetorical analysis of rap lyrics, my research will include a component of ethnomusicology. I will use

ethnomusicology in my attempt to understand how Native American rappers communicate identity and what that says about the broader Native American community. I will study both the lyrics and the music for “AbOriginal.” What instrument a musician chooses for a song is a rhetorical choice and should be included when studying identity creation and communication.

“AbOriginal” Analysis

Frank Waln wrote “AbOriginal” in 2013 to speak to the feelings of powerlessness that people feel when their actions to protect what they love seem futile (Semiatin, 2015). Most of the lyrics address the relationship between the rapper and his community and the rapper and society. The song is five minutes and 23 seconds, and contains three verses, two pickups, two choruses, and two bridges. In this analysis of “AbOriginal,” I will analyze the song line by line and provide the pentadic element count for each line. After the line by line analysis, I will circle back to determine the pentadic ratio for the rap overall. The pentadic ratio of the overall song will inform the pentadic philosophy of the rap.

Before reading the analysis, please listen to [“AbOriginal”](#) and follow along.

Overview of “AbOriginal”: In Verse 1, Waln introduces the theme of “AbOriginal,” which deals with frustration, but ultimately leads to motivation and hope. In Verse 2, he addresses the difficulty of stereotypes and the anger he feels about the general relationship between Native Americans and the United States government. In Verse 3, Waln communicates how he will fight against oppression and stereotypes.

Pickup 1 (repeated x 2): Look at all around look around at the whole thing

Act: look at all around, look around

Scene: the whole thing, *music – synthesized melody*

Here, Waln opens the rap with a command to an implied alter-agent. He wants the alter-agent to take notice of the surroundings and since he does not reference a specific scene, opting instead for “the whole thing” as the point of reference, the surroundings can be read as the general environment or conditions of the alter-agent. Since Waln draws attention to the scene in this line, the scene (the environment or conditions) must contain something of significance. During this first pickup, Waln’s vocals are the focus and the music that is present is modern and synthesized, possibly to connect with mainstream and contemporary audiences. Since the music is not the focus in this part, the music acts as scene.

If your skin is brown then you’re down for the old pain

Alter-agent: your, you’re

Purpose: if your skin is brown

Act: you’re down for the old pain

This second part of the pickup begins to explain “the whole thing,” namely, the overall condition of Native Americans within the United States of America. By using the phrase “down for the old pain,” Waln is touching on the view that mainstream society holds of

Native Americans as being complicit in or resigned to their condition. If someone is “down” for something, it means he/she is fine with it and perhaps enjoys it. If I say I’m down to go get ice cream, it means that I agree with that activity and want to do it. Here, Waln is telling the listener that if his/her skin is brown then, in society’s view, he/she “must” be okay with the “old pain.” The old pain is a reference to the suffering of loss—loss of land, of family, of honor.

Verse 1/ Line 1: Young boy I’m leaving home (all alone)

Agent: young boy, I’m

Act: I’m leaving home (all alone)

Scene: all alone, *music – synthesized beat/drum*

The agent harkens to the past, when he was a young boy and left home by himself. By beginning with a recollection of the past, the agent is setting the scene for growth. Since he is not still a young boy, the listener knows that something important must happen between youth and the present day. He also mentions leaving home by himself, an act that signals courage. For the entirety of Verse 1, the music is synthesized and modern, most likely to place the lyrics in a modern environment. The music serves as a setting for Waln’s vocals.

Verse1/ Line 2: On the rez I grew up unknown (with my stone)

Scene: on the rez

Agent: I

Act: grew up unknown

Alter-agent: my stone

The parenthetical words “with my stone” are not immediately comprehensible. “My stone” may be a nod to his mother, since he wrote a song by the same name in 2012 that focused on his young life with his single mother. In the song, he identifies his mother as his stone. A search for “Native American Lakota grow up with a stone” shows that there is a Sioux legend called “The Stone Boy” about a woman who grows up with four brothers who disappear. She then bears a child from a stone she swallowed that gave her a vision. The woman raises her stone son alone in the woods and he eventually goes off to find her four brothers (“Native American legends: The stone boy”). While “my stone” is most likely a reference to his earlier song, “[My Stone](#),” and is therefore a reference to his mother (making it an instance of an alter-agent), the Sioux legend of “The Stone Boy” is also an interesting consideration for this lyric. If Waln is making an allusion to the legend of “The Stone Boy,” he may be communicating that he has had a vision since childhood that he has had to foster on his own.

Verse 1/ Line 3: The world said I couldn't be king (they disown)

Alter-agent: the world, they

Act: said I couldn't be king

Agent: I

The emphasis in this line is the alter-agent, which is the world or society. The alter-agent, the world, tells the agent that he cannot be king and they disown him, rendering him a member of society no longer. The power in this lyric rests with the world since it is capable of determining an individual's role or importance. This line communicates the idea of society not viewing Native Americans as capable of fulfilling the same roles as non-Natives and thus discrediting Natives as contributing members of society.

Verse 1/ Line 4: But in the city I can see a throne

Scene: but in the city

Agent: I

Act: can see a throne

The agent has hope in this line, in spite of his conditions. "The city" is a contrast to the reservation Waln mentions in the beginning of Verse 1. Waln associates the reservation with being unknown but if he sits on the throne in the city, he will be known by all.

People who sit on thrones are not unknown. "The city" may be a reference to the general

society that exists outside of the reservation or it may be a reference to a city close to the reservation, which would indicate a more personal “throne” or ruling experience.

Verse 1/ Line 5: Feeling like/ the king of the damned in a kingdom of sand

Agent: the king of the damned

Scene: kingdom of sand

When the agent says that he feels like the king of the damned, he may be making a general reference to a situation in which he feels he holds a position over others who are in unfortunate and hopeless situations. The agent may also be drawing upon the 1935 film, *King of the Damned*, directed by Walter Forde, in which the protagonist is a prisoner on an island where the ruling person’s strict and harsh policies cause him to plan a revolt. The imagery of a ruler of hopeless people in a kingdom that is unstable seems to refer to the Native Americans, specifically living on reservations, and the agent’s own position of authority within his community.

Verse 1/ Line 6: Building castles as my freedom expand

Act: building castles, expand

Agent: my

Since the agent is building castles in a kingdom of sand, it is safe to say that these castles are not permanent and do not have strong foundations. The agent is perhaps using his

newly expanded freedom to create and build structures that are meant to be fortifications and places of refuge, but since they are communicated through the metaphor of sand, they are tenuous. Waln's expanded freedoms may be related to his role within the larger Native community that is due largely to his success as a musical artist. The castles, in this case, could also seem to be impermanent in that if his success wanes, anything he has built may also fall out of favor.

Verse 1/ Line 7: Just to watch them fall down as the tides roll in

Act: just to watch them fall down

Scene: as the tides roll in

Agency: as the tides roll in

Line 7 refers back to the castles that the agent built in the previous line, which refers back to line 5, the kingdom of sand in which the castles are being built. Here, the agent speaks to the futility of his position as a ruler in an unstable kingdom. "As the tides roll in" is an example of nested pentadic elements. On the surface, it refers to the scene, what is happening, the location and time. However, "as the tides roll in," is also a reference to agency, as it describes how and by what means the castles fall down. The tides of life destroy the sandcastles that the agent built. If sandcastles are read as networks and communities, then the tides that destroy them are the events mainstream society creates that push against the efforts of Native Americans to rebuild and strengthen their own communities in whatever ways are accessible to them.

Verse 1/ Line 8: I've never seen a storm come in with idle wind

Agent: I've

Act: never seen a storm come in with idle wind

Alter-agent: storm

Scene: a storm come in with idle wind

“Idle wind” may be a Shakespearean reference from *Julius Caesar* in which Brutus says to Caesar: “I’m so honest that your threats will pass by like idle wind” (4.3.71-72).

Because Waln attended Columbia College Chicago and earned his Bachelor of Arts, he probably took an English class where he had to read Julius Caesar and so is familiar with the play. In the context of “never seen a storm come in with idle wind,” the agent may be saying that there is nothing idle about society’s threats. The storm may refer to society and/or society’s regulations. He is also speaking from experience, evidenced by his statement of an act, that he has “never seen.” In this case, “storm” may be a nested pentadic element, since in this context, it is an alter-agent and is working against the agent. The storm in the agent’s environment informs his identity. If there is a storm, the agent must make efforts to protect his/herself against damages from the storm. Both the nature of the efforts made and whether or not they were made influence an individual’s identity.

Verse 1/ Line 9: And so I'm Idle No More rap the plight of the poor

Alter-agent: I'm, the plight of the poor

Agency: Idle No More

“Idle No More” is capitalized in the online version of these lyrics, with an annotation that indicates that it may be a reference to the First Nations political movement by the same name. The [Idle No More](#) political movement has roots in sovereignty, protecting the environment, and sustainable development. The movement mainly protests the use and development of Native lands by large corporations, specifically when there is no fair share of the profit with the Native communities who own the land. “The plight” is being used as a static entity in this line. If we read “the plight of the poor” as being an alter-agent because “the plight” is performing the act of rapping “I'm Idle No More,” then “Idle No More” is a reference to agency. The Idle No More movement is the method, the instrument, by which the difficult situation of the poor answers back to society; it is the response, the necessary outcome, of the difficult situation of the poor.

Verse 1/ Line 10: Cuz educated warriors are vital to war

Alter-agent: educated warriors

Act: vital to war, war

The “cuz” in this line connects it to the previous line, and so “educated warriors” is a reference to the poor in the previous line. In the war that the agent is rapping about, education and the mind are the most effective weapons since in modern times, physical

battles are unlikely to occur in the Native Americans' struggle with the United States government. Any war that the agent or alter-agents are waging is an ideological war. By identifying what type of warriors are "vital to war," Waln puts himself in the place of a commander. He is able to distinguish who will help fight a war and thus, he is a leader in the battle.

Verse 1/ Line 11: And we battling oppression/ got me stressing

Agent: we, me

Alter-agent: we

Act: battling oppression, got me stressing

"We" is a reference to the agent and alter-agents, in this line, meaning the agent and his "people." The agent and his people are fighting a war against oppression, a war that has been ongoing for Native Americans. To fight oppression is to fight ideology. Although in some places in the song, Waln separates himself from his community, in this line, he reintegrates himself, connecting his identity as a warrior with his community. Waln does not see himself as the only person fighting oppression because he says "we battling oppression." The people in his community are warriors, as well. The stress the agent feels most likely stems from his sense of futility in this war because of its persistence throughout the years.

Verse 1/ Line 12: Wondering if I'll ever learn my lesson

Act: wondering if, learn my lesson

Agent: I'll, my

The lesson that the agent is unwilling to learn may be the “lesson” that oppression teaches, which is that the oppressed should remain oppressed and not seek change. Since the agent is “wondering if [he'll] ever learn” it means he is aware enough to realize that there is a “lesson” that he has encountered previously and that he is repeatedly being taught. This line also harkens back to the boarding schools that Native Americans had to attend in the 19th century, where they were taught to forget their culture and instead, take on European/British culture.

Verse 1/ Line 13: Cuz I can't let my people go (oh no)

Agent: I, my

Alter-agent: people

Act: can't let my people go

The focus in this line is on the agent. The people are his people and he is directly responsible for them, evidenced by the choice of words “can't let,” which imply that the agent has control over where the people go and by the possessive “my” (his people). The parenthetical “oh no” reaffirms the agent's belief. The sense of responsibility that the

agent feels for his people shows that he believes he is in a position of power, even if the position is shaky or impermanent.

Verse 1/Line 14: And I can't let my weakness show (you'll never know)

Agent: I, my

Act: can't let my weakness show, never know

Alter-agent: you'll

This line echoes the previous line with the mirroring of its layout and the end rhyme. Again, the focus in this line is on the agent. It is the agent's weakness that he cannot show. The "you'll never know" in parenthesis refers to the agent's weakness. The "you'll," the alter-agent, may be a reference to his people from the previous line, the world/society, or the listener (who may be someone from one or the other of those two groups).

Verse 1/Line 15: Even when I'm hopeless and I'm pitiful

Agent: I'm

Act: hopeless and pitiful

Scene: hopeless and pitiful

The act of the agent being hopeless and pitiful are the circumstances (scene) of this line. The focus in this line is on the agent, as both adjectives refer back to the agent. So far, Waln emphasizes his strength but this line acknowledges that he, too, feels desperate and discouraged at times. Analysis of this line should include the following line below.

Verse 1/Line 16: I keep going knowing that I'm AB Original²

Agent: I, I'm

Act: I keep going

Alter-agent: AB Original

The agent is hopeless, pitiful, keeps going, knows, and is “AB Original,” or aboriginal, referring to Native identity. The agent marks his Native identity as a source of strength and hope, which he can draw on when he is troubled. Although the agent is identifying as aboriginal, aboriginal is not the agent. While the agent is aboriginal, other agents are able to identify as aboriginal. Aboriginal is a quality and characteristic of the agent, an identifier that other agents can use but, even though “aboriginal” may take on different qualities depending on the person identifying with it, it still retains its own qualities, thereby making “AB Original” an alter-agent. It is, in effect, a separate entity.

² Waln titles the song “AbOriginal” but the lyrics choose the spelling “AB Original.” I decided to stay true to the source and keep the “AB Original” spelling within the lyrics. I do not know if there is a significance in the spelling change.

Chorus A: I got this AB Original soul/ I got this AB Original flow

Agent: I

Alter- agent: AB Original, *music – synthesized traditional Native vocals, synthesized flute followed by acoustic flute at the end of the chorus*

Agency: got this AB Original soul, got this AB Original flow

While the music behind the vocals for Chorus A is modern and synthesized, just as in the first pickup and the first verse, Chorus A is the first instance in which Waln includes traditional Native American vocals. These vocals are blended into the modern music. There is also a flute playing. The music in Chorus A acts as an alter-agent because the music is an actor in this instance—communicating an aspect of the agent’s identity. Waln uses the music in Chorus A to bolster his identity. After the vocals of the chorus are finished, Waln chooses to isolate the flute until Verse 2 begins. “AB Original” is an alter-agent because while it is connected to the agent, it does not come directly from the agent. The “AB Original” is a separate entity that the agent adopts for and within himself. This is also made clear by the agent’s statement of “having” the AB Original soul and flow; there is a subtle difference in claims about self—people either “have” qualities or they “are” qualities (the difference between saying “I have five feet and nine inches of height versus “I am five feet and nine inches tall”). The distinction between “having” and “being” is the quality of separation. When an agent “has” a characteristic, there is the possibility of the agent “not having” the characteristic; whereas, when the agent “is” a characteristic, the implication is of a greater enveloping and containment of the characteristic within the agent, an inseparability of the quality of characteristic. In this

verse, the AB Original soul and flow are both instruments for the agent; they reference an aspect of the agent's agency by which he accomplishes his goals.

I got this pain that I can't shake/ ties to my people I can't break

Agent: I, my

Alter-agent: my people

Scene: this pain that I can't shake, ties to my people I can't break

Act: can't shake, can't break

“This pain that I can't shake” is the scene, as it pertains to the circumstances of the overall act, stated in the final line of this chorus. “Ties to my people I can't break” references circumstances and act—the ties that the agent cannot break are a circumstance while not breaking the ties is an act. In this line, the pain that the agent feels is connected to the ties to his people, the alter-agents. The pain may come from his love for his people and his knowledge of their suffering that he cannot fully ease. It may also be a reference to a more personal pain felt by the agent, knowing that the oppressive environment he faces will be difficult to overcome.

Got this history in my blood/ got my tribe that shows me love

Agent: my, me

Alter-agent: tribe

Purpose: got this history in my blood, got my tribe that shows me love

“Got this history in my blood” is purpose because the history in the agent’s blood explains why the agent is performing the acts in this song. The same is true for “got my tribe that shows me love,” since the reason for the agent’s acts is also due to the agent’s tribe, which is the alter-agent in this line. Here, Waln tells his listener that both history and present-day community are important to who he is and why he is. Since the history and the love are both purpose, they are also aspects of identity. They are motivating factors for the agent.

So when I rise/ you rise/ come on let’s rise like

Agent: I, let’s

Alter-agent: you, let’s

Act: rise

Agency: rise

“Let’s” contains both the agent and alter-agent. The directive to “rise” that the agent repeatedly makes in this line is an act and perhaps, even an instance of agency when taken in the greater context of the lyrics. The agent’s repetition of “rise” draws parallels to Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise” (1978). The opening lines of Angelou’s poem are, “You may write me down in history/ With your bitter, twisted lies,/ You may trod me in the very dirt/ But still, like dust, I’ll rise.” Angelou’s poem deals with themes of oppression punctuated by the insistence, “I rise.” Waln’s “AbOriginal” has a similar method of counteracting prejudice and oppression. The act of rising is one of the methods of the agent’s overall goal of overcoming. The agent is calling on the alter-agent(s) to rise

above the circumstances and oppression. He is counting his success as their success. This line communicates the agent's hope for overcoming and his belief that he is able to help his people.

Verse 2/Line 1: It's been months since I've seen a Native/ It's messing with my creative/ Approach/ It's got me jaded/isolated

Scene: it's been months, *music – synthesized beat and flute*

Agent: I've, my, me

Alter-agent: Native

Act: messing with my creative approach, got me jaded/isolated

Verse 2 continues with the modern and synthesized music. The focus in this line is on the act—what happened. Not seeing a Native, the alter-agent in this line, for months has left the agent feeling “jaded” and “isolated” and has upset his “creative approach.” It would be safe to say that if the agent has not seen a Native for months, this scene of the rap does not take place on a reservation. Also, since not seeing a Native affects his creativity, it is clear that his community is a significant part of his identity.

**Verse 2/Line 2: No one understands me like my people/ these white kids don't know
my struggle**

Alter-agent: no one, my people, white kids

Agent: me, my

Act: understands, don't know my struggle

The emphasis in this line is on people and what they can and cannot do. The agent believes that only "his" people can understand him, presumably because they share a common environment and experiences; whereas, the "white kids" do not. Waln expresses one of the aspects of existing within a non-dominant narrative, which is the dominant group's inability to understand fully the non-dominant group's experiences. This is the first instance in the song where the agent specifically identifies a group other than his own community. This line also contains more instances of alter-agents than usual.

**Verse 2/Line 3: I ain't equal in their eyes and their intolerance brings me troubles/
I'm not/**

Agent: I, me, I'm

Agency: ain't equal in their eyes and their intolerance

Act: ain't equal, brings me troubles

Alter-agent: their, their eyes, their intolerance

Here, the agent follows up on his statement from the previous line. “Their” is a reference to alter-agent and refers back to the “white kids” from the previous line. The phrase “ain’t equal in their eyes and their intolerance” is an example of nested pentadic elements, as the whole phrase can be a reference to agency since it is the means by which the agent is brought trouble. The “ain’t equal” is an act and the agent does not believe the “white kids” view him as an equal; they are intolerant of him. In this line, “their eyes” and “their intolerance” can be read as alter-agents since the eyes and the intolerance seem to take on their own ability to act. This line is fairly straightforward in that the agent is explicitly stating that the white kids do not see him as equal (because he is Native) and that their prejudices about Natives are what cause the agent to have problems.

Verse 2/Line 4: Their noble savage/ doing damage/ to their perception of who I am

Agent: their noble savage, I am

Alter-agent: their, noble savage

Act: doing damage

Agency: (not) their noble savage

“Noble savage,” while signaling to the agent, is actually an alter-agent, as well, since the previous line ends with the agent saying he is not (their noble savage). In this line, the agent not being “their noble savage” is an instance of agency, as it is how his following act of “doing damage” happens. Here, the agent speaks to the well-worn trope of the noble Native person. His use of “savage” juxtaposed with the adjective “noble”

demonstrates the nefariousness of positive stereotypes. Even though “noble” is a positive attribute, “savage” is not. Some may believe that Native Americans should be happy with the stereotype that they are noble; however, the stereotype still pigeonholes them into pre-ordained behaviors. The effect that the positive stereotype has is equal to the effect that the negative stereotype has in that it creates a false identity for the agent instead of allowing for his true identity to form.

**Verse 2/Line 5: Self-destruct when I self-construct my own plan/ of my identity/
from their affinity**

Act: self-destruct, self-construct

Agency: self-construct my own plan, from their affinity

Agent: I, my

Alter-agent: their

The two compound phrases in this line, “self-destruct” and “self-construct,” attract the most attention because they occur in the beginning of the line, they mirror each other, and are opposites of each other. “Self-construct my own plan” and “from their affinity” are the instruments or methods by which the agent creates his identity. There is no specific agent attached to the phrase “self-destruct,” but since the agent raps about constructing his own identity, it is safe to assume he is not talking about himself but is instead attaching “self-destruct” to the actions of the “white kids” from the previous lines, especially since later in the line he references them again with “their affinity.”

To analyze the message in this line further, we must define affinity: “a natural liking for or attraction to a person, thing, idea; a person, thing, idea, for which such a natural liking or attraction is felt; relationship by marriage or by ties other than those of blood; inherent likeness or agreement; close resemblance or connection,” (www.dictionary.com). The agent tells the listener that he is creating his own “plan” of his identity, his own idea of who he is and wants to be, from the “affinity” of the “white kids,” or the majority culture. The affinity of the majority culture could be their sympathy for Native Americans or it could be a reference to any similarities in the cultures caused by assimilation. With this line, the agent might be saying that the majority culture cannot stand on its own when Native Americans create and insist on their own vision of their identities using the shared characteristics or sympathies from the majority culture as reference points for identity creation. The focus here is on the agent(s) and the act.

Verse 2/Line 6: To raping culture/ they rape land/ shame an NDN just to save the man

Act: raping culture, rape land, shame an NDN

Alter-agent: they, an NDN, the man

Purpose: just to save the man

This line may hint at the “affinity” in the previous line. The affinity may be for “raping culture” that belongs to Native Americans by forcing them to assimilate but also taking aspects of their culture(s) and incorporating them into mainstream culture, albeit

bastardized replications of the culture and its artifacts. The agent also draws attention to the “land,” which signals the United States and the history between Native Americans and the U.S. government. When the agent raps, “shame an NDN just to save the man,” NDN is phonetic textual shorthand for Indian, used mainly within Native American communities. “The man” most likely refers to the U.S. government. Here, the agent is referencing the tendency of both the mainstream culture and the government to scapegoat Native Americans in order to uphold the authority of the government and subsequently, the mainstream culture.

Verse 2/Line 7: But this NDN never dies/ dies dies dies/ RISE

Agent: this NDN

Act: never dies, dies, rise

This final line in Verse 2 is a statement of resilience from the agent. The repetition of “dies” four times in a row emphasizes that the agent refuses to let circumstances or mainstream culture silence him. The final word, “RISE,” is a command to the listener and potentially, the Native American community as a whole. In this line, Waln expresses his individual position, one of perseverance and survival, while also drawing his listeners into his position with “RISE.” It is as if he is saying, “this NDN never dies and neither should you (RISE).”

Chorus A repeats, word for word

Transition Bridge (x 3): I got those reservation blues

Reservation blues

Agent: I

Purpose: those reservation blues

Scene: *music – synthesized beat and garbled vocals*

Waln chooses to synthesize his vocals during the transition bridge. The music is still modern with no traditional Native American instruments or vocals added. “Those reservation blues” is a reference to purpose, since the agent having “those reservation blues” is why he has written this rap. Here, the reservation is associated with negative feelings, shown by the agent pairing the reservation with singing the blues. The blues, like rap, originated within the African American community. The blues stemmed from African American slave songs, such as spirituals, field hollers, and work songs (“What is the blues?” 2003). Sherman Alexie, wrote a novel titled *Reservation Blues* (1995) about a rock/blues band made up of Spokane Native Americans from the Spokane Reservation in Washington state. It is possible that Waln read Alexie’s novel and was influenced by it.

Pickup 1 repeats two times, word for word

Alter-agent: *music – synthesized beat and traditional Native vocals*

As the song progresses, Waln brings in more aspects of his Native identity to the music. While the first instance of Pickup 1 only included the synthesized beat, Waln includes

traditional Native vocals into this second instance. As the rap continues, the musical layer of identity begins to play a more prominent role.

**Verse 3/Line 1: It's 2013 and our chiefs are all shot/ digital blankets give spiritual
smallpox**

Scene: It's 2013 and our chiefs are all shot

Agent: our

Alter-agent: our, chiefs, digital blankets, *music – synthesized beat and traditional Native vocals blended with the beat*

Act: our chiefs are all shot, digital blankets give spiritual smallpox

Verse 3 includes modern, synthesized music, just as the previous verses do, but there also seems to be synthesized traditional Native American vocals blended into the music. Since the beat in Verse 3 includes traditional Native vocals blended into it, the music acts as an alter-agent, helping Waln create and communicate his identity within this song. The wording of this line places the digital blankets into a position of an alter-agent since the blankets are giving the smallpox. The imagery in the line calls back to the history between Native Americans and mainstream culture in that it references the well-known event wherein British settlers gave blankets that had smallpox on them to Native Americans, with the intention of infecting them with the disease. By setting the scene in 2013, the agent brings the historical event to modern times. The agent also sets the scene by including the fact that the Native American “chiefs are all shot,” which is a statement

that communicates the tragic and fragile state of the larger Native American community, especially in the context of war (as previous lines in the rap alluded to). The “digital blankets” are an allusion to technology and is perhaps meant to imply that the relationship between Native Americans and the government is still the same, rather than referencing a specific event involving technology.

Verse 3/Line 2: Certain revelations arise and my path becomes as clear as reservation skies/ and I/

Verse 3/Line 3: Could use a little hope sometimes cuz I was dead broke when I wrote this rhyme

Act: certain revelations arise, path becomes as clear as reservation skies, could use a little hope sometimes, was dead broke, wrote this rhyme

Agency: arise, could use a little hope sometimes

Agent: my, I

“Certain revelations arise” is both act and agency since “arise” is an act and can be the method by which something comes to be. The “reservation skies” line is interesting—up to this point, the agent has leaned towards troubled imagery when referencing the reservation (“reservation blues” growing up unknown on “the rez”). So, when the agent describes the reservation skies as being clear, he is creating a positive association with the reservation. When the agent says he “could use a little hope sometimes,” it is a reference to an act, as well as agency, since “hope” is a method or instrument that the

agent can use. The agent also mentions being “dead broke,” a reference to an act, when writing the rap, a statement that is common in the early songs of rappers. The statement signals to the listener that the agent and the agent’s experiences in the rap are authentic. Being “dead broke” is a struggle and the agent understands that his listeners will most likely come from reservations, as well, where poverty is overwhelming problem.

Verse 3/Line 4: So faith in myself is what I supposed to find

Agency: faith in myself

Agent: myself, I

Act: supposed to find

The agent must find “faith in [himself],” which, arguably must come from within. If the “so” beginning this line connects it to the previous line, then we can link “faith in myself” to the hope that the agent needs. In this line, the agent, Waln, knows that he has to look within for strength to overcome his circumstances. He cannot look to external sources for strength.

Verse 3/Line 5: Play cultural red rover and I broke the line

Act: play cultural red rover, broke the line

Agent: I

Alter-agent: the line

“Red Rover” is a children’s game where there are two teams, both teams stand in lines, holding hands, and face the other team, and the leader of the team will call to the other team to send a specific person “over.” The player who is called over must try to break the linked hands of the opposing team by running through them. With this statement, the agent is stating that he was able to break through mainstream society’s cultural “line” that is presumably meant to keep “others” out. Since “the line” is made up of others and the agent interacts with the line metaphorically and actually (the game of Red Rover is the metaphor for society’s boundaries), the line acts as an alter-agent.

Verse 3/Line 6: I blew right past it/ raps spew like acid

Agent: I

Act: blew right past it, raps spew like acid

Alter-agent: it

Purpose: raps spew like acid

Again, the agent references the previous line, where “it” refers back to the “line” from the previous line, stating the effort with which he broke the cultural “line” and perhaps, since he follows this up with a statement about his raps, he is referring to his rap music as the method by which he broke the cultural “Red Rover” line. The line, again, is the alter-agent. When the agent postures by saying his raps “spew like acid,” the statement is about the power and style of his words. So, “raps spew like acid” may also contain nested elements by referring to purpose, as well, since the agent’s raps may be the means by which he broke the cultural boundaries. Overall, this line relies on a metaphor, which is common for rap. A metaphor is a neat example of nested pentadic elements because of their double meanings.

Verse 3/Line 7: Mind of an activist Lakota Sioux assassin

Agent: mind

Alter-agent: activist Lakota Sioux assassin

Here is a description of identity by the agent. “Mind” is a reference to the agent. Instead of saying that he **is like** an “activist Lakota Sioux assassin,” he says that his **mind** is like such. The “activist Lakota Sioux assassin” is an alter-agent since the agent is not saying he is the activist/assassin, only that his mind is like one. The “Lakota Sioux” descriptor signifies his Native American, or “NDN,” heritage while the descriptors “activist” and “assassin” both imply fighting. The activist fights using protests to publicize injustices, while an assassin secretly kills. The focus in this line is on the agent.

Verse 3/Line 8: Who mastered Hip Hop³ to fight his battles

Agent: who, his

Agency: mastered Hip Hop

Act: mastered Hip Hop, to fight

The “activist Lakota Sioux assassin” uses hip-hop as a weapon. The agent is telling the listener that he is someone who will stand up and fight for Native Americans using his raps as his weapon. Waln recognizes that his role as a musical artist gives him power to influence others. He holds a special position that allows him to communicate on behalf of his community. Again, the focus is on the agent and what he can do in his life.

Verse 3/Line 9: Saddle up this beat and let my rhymes unravel (yeah)

Act: saddle up this beat, let my rhymes unravel

Agency: saddle up this beat

Agent: my

“Saddle up this beat” is both the act and an instance of agency, as the agent speaks of rapping masterfully by “riding” the beat. In rap, riding the beat is a technique in which rappers match their voices to the flow of the song (RM and Demokingz, 2016). The personification of the beat by the call to “saddle [it] up” creates imagery of the beat being

³ Typically written as “hip-hop” but the lyrics show “Hip Hop.”

like a horse. Because the beat is connected to imagery of a horse being saddled, as well as connected to the agent's weapon of hip hop, this is an indirect reference to war. The beat is being saddled like a war horse would be and will be used in conjunction with the agent's weapon of hip hop. While the phrase "ride the beat" is common in hip hop, the agent draws attention to Native American culture by reimagining the phrase using "saddle up."

Verse 3/Line 10: (Hoka) Call your cavalry because I leave stereotypes as casualties

Verse 3/Line 11: (Hoka) Better call your cavalry because I leave all your doubts as casualties

Act: call your cavalry, leave stereotypes as casualties, better call your cavalry, leave all your doubts as casualties

Alter-agent: your cavalry, your

Agent: I

"Hoka" is a Sioux word that means "badger" (Michaels, n.d.) but the phrase "Hoka Hey," according to Urban Dictionary, is a battle cry or a phrase that means "let's do it"/ "clear the path." Since the word is in the context of a battle, it would seem the agent is using it as a battle cry. The agent is speaking both about the alter-agent he is addressing and the alter-agent(s) whom the "your" in these lines commands. Because stereotypes and doubts are the fallen soldiers, this battle is against (mis)perceptions.

Bridge: I don't see no reservations now/ I'm trying to get up out of here

I don't need somebody to tell me how/ I'm supposed to live my life in fear

Agent: I, I'm, me, my

Act: don't see no reservations now, trying to get up out of here, tell me how, live my life

Scene: see no reservations now, *music – synthesized beat*

Alter-agent: somebody

The bridge contains modern music. Throughout the rap, the agent tends to identify the alter-agents using nouns or proper nouns but in this instance, the alter-agent is an anonymous somebody. Waln, again, views reservations negatively, evidenced by his desire to “get up out of here.” It is unclear who the “somebody” is who is telling Waln to live in fear. The somebody may be someone within his community who has a more defeated or fatalistic view about the state of the Native American community, or society at large. Perhaps the “somebody” refers to Native Americans, in general, who have learned the lesson of oppression.

Chorus B (x 2): These borders can't hold me back (Heca) Can't hold me back

Alter-agent: these borders

Act: can't hold me back

Agent: me

Scene: *music – synthesized beat with traditional Native vocals blended into the beat*

Chorus B has modern music with traditional Native American vocals blended into it. A search for the term “heca” results in several possible meanings: be of such kind, be a such (Tüting, 2003), or necessary (YellowHand, n.d.). The agent may be using the term to describe the borders and their inability to hold him back, as in “the borders are of such kind that can't hold me back.” Since the overlying scene of the rap is the reservation, the borders are most likely a reference to reservation borders and boundaries. As a Native American, the agent experiences nuanced feelings towards the reservation. Earlier in the rap, the agent talks about his path being as “clear as reservation skies,” the imagery of which implies fair weather and positive connotations. In other instances, the agent describes the reservation as being almost stifling. The agent mentions “breaking the line” while playing “cultural red rover” in previous lines, lyrics that may also be connected to this chorus. Neither the borders, as alter-agents, of the reservation nor the cultural borders can hold the agent back.

Pickup 2: If you a red man/ you a dead man

“Better off on the rez” what they said man

“You a mascot/ just a ghost now

Just a thing I wear up on my clothes now”

Agent: you, red man, dead man, a thing

Act: if you a red man, they said, you a mascot, just a ghost, wear up on my clothes

Alter-agent: they, I, my

Scene: *music – synthesized beat*

“You a red man” can also be read as the act, or rather, part of a conditional act. “You a dead man” is the agent, as well, and completes the conditional act. The act is being a Native American and thus, being a “dead man.” The conditional act can be read as the purpose—why is the agent a dead man? Because of the act of being a “red man.” In the next line of this pickup, the agent invokes an alter-agent to speak with, ““Better off on the rez’ what they said man.” The word “they” refers to the alter-agent in third-person, which means the agent is the one communicating the quote. Although “you” could possibly be a reference to an alter-agent, the structure of these lyrics seems to indicate the agent is communicating to the listener instances of prejudice that he has encountered, where the “you” is a reference to himself and the ideas are in reality coming from an implied or explicit (as with the quotation) alter-agent.

Being a mascot and “just a ghost” are both acts. The following line completes this lyric with “Just a thing I wear up on my clothes now.” “A thing” is a reference to the agent, although it is signifying an inanimate object. These lines speak to the prejudice that the agent has been hinting at throughout the rap. Here, the alter-agent makes an effort to discredit and dehumanize the agent by using a mascot, a ghost, and just “thing” to refer to the agent specifically, but more generally, to Native Americans. Conjuring up the image of the ghost also seeks to reinforce the false notion that Native Americans are no longer alive, do not exist, or simply do not matter.

Pickup 1 repeats four times, word for word

Scene: *music – synthesized beat*

Alter-agent: *music – the third and fourth repetition of the Pickup contain traditional Native vocals blended into the beat*

Pentadic Elements

Below are two tables that account for the pentadic elements that are located throughout the lyrics. Table 1 lists the parts of the song and provides a numerical count of each element of the pentad that occurs in that part of the song. Table 1 aids in discovering the ratio(s) of the lyrics. Table 2 provides clarity concerning the alter-agents and their identification. While some alter-agents are clearly identified in the lyrics (such as “white

kids”), a majority of alter-agents are not clearly identified. Table 2 attempts to clarify some of those instances.

Table 1: Number of pentadic elements per part of song

Note: If a part of song is repeated, the pentadic element counts reflect the repetition

Elements of Pentad	Act	Scene	Agent	Alter-agent	Agency	Purpose
Part of Song						
Verse 1	19	8	19	11	2	0
Verse 2	15	2	13	13	4	1
Verse 3	20	1	12	9	5	1
Chorus A	6	4	14	12	6	4
Chorus B	2	1	2	2	0	0
Pickup 1	24	11	0	18	0	8
Pickup 2	5	1	4	3	0	0
Transition Bridge	0	1	3	0	0	3
Bridge	4	2	4	1	0	0
TOTALS =	95	31	71	69	17	17

The totals for each element of the pentad show that overall, “AbOriginal” contains many more references to act, agent, and alter-agent, respectively, than to the other elements of the pentad. The pentadic ratio skews heavily towards act-agent/alter-agent. This is not surprising considering most rap lyrics focus on the agent (the rapper), or other agents in the rapper’s life, as well as what the rapper is capable of doing. By determining the pentadic ratio of the rhetoric, one can gain a better understanding of the motive of the speaker.

Table 2: Identification of alter-agents and their location in the song

Alter- Agents	Location in Song
Your/you’re – listener	Pickup 1
<i>Music – traditional Native vocals</i>	Pickup 1
My stone – agent’s mother	Verse 1/ line 2
The world/ they – society	Verse 1/ line 3
Storm – society, society’s regulations	Verse 1/ line 8
The poor/the plight of the poor – N.A. on reservations	Verse 1/ line 9
Educated warriors – N.A. on reservations	Verse 1/ line10
We – agent and alter-agents (N.A. on reservations)	Verse 1/ line 11

People – N.A. community to which the agent belongs	Verse 1/ line 13; Chorus A; Verse 2/ line 2
You'll – possibly the listener	Verse 1/ line 14
AB Original – aboriginal, native, characteristic	Verse 1/ line 16; Chorus A
Tribe – agent's tribe	Chorus A
You/ let's – (N.A.) listener/ agent and listener	Chorus A
<i>Music – synthesized drum beat, traditional Native vocals, flute</i>	Chorus A
Native – Native American	Verse 2/ line 1
No one/ white kids – people outside of agent's N.A. community	Verse 2/ line 2
Their/ their intolerance/ their eyes – 'white kids'	Verse 2/ line 3
Their/ noble savage – 'white kids'/ stereotype of N.A.	Verse 2/ line 4
Their – 'white kids'	Verse 2/ line 5
They/ the man – 'white kids'/ the U.S. government	Verse 2/ line 6
<i>Music – traditional Native vocals blended with beat</i>	Verse 3
Our/ chiefs/ digital blankets – agent and N.A. community/ N.A. leaders/ perhaps a general allusion	Verse 3/ line 1

to relationship between N.A. community and U.S. government	
The line – society’s boundaries	Verse 3/ line 5
It – society’s boundaries (from line 5)	Verse 3/ line 6
Activist Lakota Sioux assassin – hypothetical comparison	Verse 3/ line 7
Your/ your cavalry – people outside of agent’s N.A. community, people whom agent is “warring” with/ “soldiers” or supporters of the people outside of agent’s N.A. community	Verse 3/ line 10-11
Somebody – unidentified	Bridge
These borders – personified and physical limitations	Chorus B
They/ I / my – person outside of agent’s N.A. community, person whom holds stereotypical views of agent or N.A. in general	Pickup 2

To look at alter-agents more deeply, I examined the types of alter-agents listed in Table 2 and analyzed them to see if I could categorize the alter-agents that are present and if there are more instances of one category of alter-agents. The following table lists the categories of the alter-agents and how frequently they occur.

Table 3: Categories of alter-agents

Alter-Agent	Category
You, your, you're, you'll	Listener
The poor, educated warriors, my people, tribe, Native, chiefs, somebody	Community/N.A.
The world, they, storm, no one, white kids, their, their intolerance, their eyes, noble savage, the man, digital blankets, these borders, your cavalry, somebody	Society/Government
My stone, my people, we, AB Original, let's, our, activist Lakota Sioux assassin	Connected to Agent

The four categories that emerged are Listener, Community/ N.A., Society/Government, and Connected to Agent. The Listener category contains instances where Waln directly addresses the listener with “you” or a variation of “you.” Community/N.A. contains instances where Waln references his people or his tribe. The category Society/Government has alter-agents that refer to the world or any other entity that is set up as opposing the agent. Finally, the category of Connected to Agent contains alter-agents that Waln directly connects to himself either by claiming possession (“my”) or by including them with himself (“our”).

These four categories show Waln’s struggle of being both a part of and not a part of different communities. While he is a part of his Native American community, he also struggles against it. He also struggles against mainstream society and its perception of

who he is as a Native. While he struggles against society, he also tries to work within it in order to make space for Native American communities. Waln struggles within and against both his Native American community and mainstream society. Gloria Anzaldúa addresses this struggle in *Borderlands: The new mestiza = La frontera*, “our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains” (1987). By combining rap music with a discussion of Native American struggles, Waln uses “AbOriginal” to answer his own struggles with identity.

Ratios

Based on the total counts of the pentadic elements listed in Table 1, the ratio most prominent in “AbOriginal” is the act-agent or act-agent/alter-agent ratio. Since act, agent, and alter-agent occur most frequently in “AbOriginal” with counts of 95, 70, and 69, respectively, the ratio is act-agent (95-70) or act-agent/alter-agent (95-70/69). These three elements have much higher counts than scene (31), agency (17), or purpose (17).

Act-Agent/Alter-Agent

The nature of a rap song lends itself to the act-agent ratio. The philosophical implications of this ratio are realism (act) and idealism (agent). The rapper has to be both an idealist and a realist. By creating the rap song, the rapper shows idealism in that he/she wants to expound personal views to others. Typically, the rapper pays homage to realism through the rhetoric and methods of communicating his/her personal views. In Verse 1, Waln emphasizes realism over idealism when he stresses the frustration he feels with his and his community’s situation. Verse 2 also emphasize realism over idealism but only

slightly. While Waln discusses stereotypes, he also introduces his solutions to the injustice he faces. In Verse 3, Waln also emphasizes realism over idealism when he approaches how he will fight against oppression and stereotypes.

By drawing attention to the struggles or injustices of life, the rapper tends to provide support for his/her personal views. If the rapper were only to draw attention to the struggles of life, without providing his/her personal views (which tend to offer solutions or encouragement), the rap would be overwhelmingly nihilistic. The rapper has to be conscious enough to know that nihilism will not bring about the change that he/she is seeking.

Act vs. Scene

Burke states that, “[...] we may note a related resource of Rhetoric: one may deflect attention from scenic matters by situating the motives of an act in the agent [...]” (Burke 17). Most raps are concerned with the rapper and the his/her actions. In some cases, the rapper sets the scene and uses it as motives for actions. But rappers have personas and those personas are important. While Burke’s point stands for dramatic works, the analysis of non-dramatic works must be approached from a different angle. So, although situating motives of an act in an agent may deflect from scenic matters within dramatic works, situating motives within the scene in a rap song deflects from the rapper’s persona and narrative.

Within rap lyrics, the agent is always the rapper. In dramatism, the agent can be different characters because, typically, dramas are told in third-person omniscient, where the audience peers in on the actions of others. Imagine, though, a monologue within a

dramatic work. During a monologue, the agent is always the person speaking. A rap is a type of monologue. In fact, raps are typically filled with first-person references.

There may be different scenes within a rap but unlike a dramatic work, there is not necessarily an identifiable plot. Rappers write songs to communicate ideas. There does not need to be a plot or an explicit setting for the idea. In fact, the plot almost always situates around the rapper's life and the setting is almost always the rapper's personal environment. When Nicki Minaj raps, "I'm with some hood girls lookin' back at it/ and a good girl in my tax bracket" ("Feeling Myself," 2014), the listener understands that the setting, or the scene, is Minaj's life, in general. She does not tell the listener that she is in California or Miami, or some other semi-exotic location. There are some instances in rap where the rapper does state his/her location but in these instances, the setting is typically used as a prop, to signal a certain type of lifestyle. For a rapper, the scene may influence the rapper and may have created the rapper; however, the rapper/persona and what he/she does is more important than the scene.

Burke goes on to say that, "To this writer, at least, the act-agent ratio more strongly suggests a temporal or sequential relationship than a purely positional or geometric one" (16). Here, Burke is arguing for the prevalence of scene-agent rather than act-agent, when it comes to dramatism. In rap, the act-agent ratio is more prevalent and it is because there is a temporal and sequential relationship. The acts within a rap are "contained" within the scene of the rap. If one were to analyze the performance of the rap rather than the lyrics then the agent would be the rapper and the scene would be whatever scenes are shown in the music video. Or, the scene would be the recording studio, and the acts would be the physical act of rapping along with whatever the rapper does in the

music video. When analyzing the lyrics of a rap song, though, the scene is not as prevalent as in dramatic works.

Importance of the Alter-Agent

In a traditional Burkean pentad analysis, there is typically only “agent.” The term “agent,” as noted earlier, refers to who is performing the act or who is the focus of the specific text. “Agent” is sufficient for a vast majority of textual analysis. However, the textual analysis of rap lyrics necessitates an additional term, “alter-agent.” Since the lyrics of a rap song typically have a consistent agent, the rapper, due to the genre, “alter-agents” abound. This analysis will use alter-agent to refer to other agents within the text with whom the agent interacts or whose secondary (to the main act within the lyric) actions affect the agent.

“Alter-agent” is used rather than sub-agent, counter-agent, or co-agent because the prefix sub- implies that that the agent is beneath the main agent, and “counter” implies opposition to the agent, while the prefix co- implies that the agent is equal with the main agent. With references to Natives, sub-agent would be inappropriate because they are not beneath the main agent, the rapper. Co-agent may be more appropriate; however, co-agent would not be able to be used consistently throughout the analysis to refer to other agents. For example, when the rapper refers to the government, co-agent would be inappropriate, as the government is not on equal ground with the agent. The agent, within this analysis, refers disparagingly to the government. Sub-agent may be appropriate but again, the term would not be able to be used consistently for all other

agents. Thus, alter-agent is the most inclusive and consistent term for the other agents within the lyrics.

Alter-agent simply means other-agent. Creating another term was necessary for this Burkean analysis since Frank Waln includes many references to other agents throughout the lyrics. Alter-agent allows for efficient differentiation between the agents, without valuations (such as co- and counter-), while also giving space to Native American rhetoric.

Music as Alter-Agent

In “AbOriginal,” there are tensions when it comes to music as an alter-agent. The music is mainly synthesized and modern, acting as scene, with traditional Native American vocals and instruments brought in at key parts. The tension between the modern music and the traditional Native American components, which are occasionally synthesized, adds to and supports Waln’s overall message about his identity. When the music does not include traditional Native American vocals or acoustic flute and is instead comprised of synthesized beats, the music serves as scene. When the music is synthesized beats, it is not the focus and serves as a setting for Waln’s raps.

“AbOriginal” is about Waln communicating his identity through references to his community, history, and his skills. Music acts as an alter-agent in “AbOriginal” when it includes aspects of his Native American identity that are blended into the synthesized modern music. This juxtaposition and blending of two aspects of Waln’s identity also serves to show his skills as a musical artist. Since the music both communicates aspects of Waln’s identity and serves as a vehicle to show his skills and bolster his message,

music is an alter-agent. Waln's use of music to communicate aspects of his identity within "AbOriginal" shows that historical identity is important to his individual identity and that he believes historical identity is also important to his audience. His choice to integrate traditional musical aspects within modern music, rather than creating a song that is only traditional music or only modern music, means that incorporating historical cultural identity into modern cultural identity is something that Waln believes is beneficial to himself and others.

When the music Waln uses becomes Native American-dominant rather than modern and synthesized, it becomes dominant in order to reinforce Native American identity. Ullestad addresses how artists use traditional Native American music within contemporary music in order to communicate identity and reconcile the different facets of their identities (2006). The lyrics are about Waln's struggle as a Native American within mainstream society, and the music mirrors this struggle when Waln has Native American music become dominant in place of the modern and synthesized music. Both the lyrics and the music reinforce this struggle with identity. The hip-hop genre with rap vocals coupled with synthesized music is complex and shows the agent moving between his identities as a rapper and as a Native American in order to create a new space, as shown in Table 3.

What is so interesting about the concept of using Burke's pentad to analyze rap lyrics is that it allows the audience to examine the many different layers of this portrayal of identity and understand the complex ways that artists communicate identity. Using Burke's pentad to analyze rap, specifically with the added term "alter-agent," is truly just the beginning when it comes to analyzing works in terms of identity. Further research

could revisit classic works and analyze them with the addition of this new term. Although Burke's pentad allows for other types of agent, using alter-agent when analyzing identity within a work will be beneficial because alter-agents facilitate a more nuanced approach concerning identity.

Final Discussion

The cultural identities of modern Native Americans are just as nuanced as their historical cultural identities. The collective cultural identity of modern Native Americans is also complex, though the collective identity shares more similarities than the cultural identities. While the differences between the cultural identities vary according to tribe, the collective identity shares events and traumas such as the Battle at Wounded Knee, the Trail of Tears, boarding schools, and reservations. Because modern Native Americans share these common experiences, these experiences affect how they create their individual identities. Even if a Native American chooses not to let knowledge of the Trail of Tears influence his/her decisions or identity, that choice is one that non-Native Americans experience differently or do not experience at all.

Native American rappers, such as Frank Waln, hold an almost prophetic position. Rather than trying to impart religious mandates on his people, Waln, by communicating his identity, seeks to lead his people into a better existence. In "AbOriginal," Waln tells his listeners that his identity is that of a leader ("king of the damned"), a general in battle ("we battling oppression"), and a person who has overcome hardship ("I don't see no reservations now"). Waln's identity, or at least his rapper persona, is that of a strong leader who experienced the same hardships as others in his community but was able to

“rise,” and therefore, wants his community to rise with him (“when I rise/you rise”). The many layers within this song—instruments, words, themes, references, metaphors—work to inform and balance each other in an effort to create a modern identity that neither forgets the past nor dwells in it to the point of discouragement.

Frank Waln might be what Gerald Vizenor would describe as a “postindian warrior of survivance” (1994) in that he creates simulations of the tribal real, any tribal imagery he communicates within his raps, in an attempt to liberate his people from modern day oppression. His use of traditional Native American vocals and acoustic flute in sections of his rap are “simulations of the tribal real.” Waln brings in traditional Native American musical elements in order to connect the historical use of music within Native American communities to a modern goal of liberating Native Americans from oppressive situations. By doing so, Waln is challenging the narratives of dominances within modern American culture.

Waln also engages in the rhetoric of survivance, which Powell defines as “survival + resistance” (2002). If any line exemplifies this in “AbOriginal,” it is Waln’s lyric, “but this NDN never dies/dies dies dies/RISE” (Verse 2, line 7). Frank Waln’s popularity and success shows that integrating the past with the present in terms of identity is important to the broader Native American community. While he does not speak for all Native Americans, and not every Native American will listen to his music or even agree with his messages, his music still sheds light on how modern Native Americans communicate and create identity. Waln positions himself and his people as warriors in “AbOriginal” and in doing so, builds an empowered collective identity for his community to engage.

Professional Goals

Since I received my undergraduate degree in English, I believe I am qualified to perform a close-text reading and rhetorical analysis of Native American rap lyrics. I have strong analytical skills and am able to interpret lyrics, make connections to overall themes of identity, and situate the research within the broader context of the traditional use of music within the general Native American community. My thesis research also makes use of skills that I have gained within the Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication Master's Program, such as analytical thinking ("Interfaces and Design," "Communicating Science," "Intercultural Communication"), qualitative coding ("Research Methods"), rhetorical analysis ("Critical Questions"), and project management ("Research Methods," "Professional Editing").

My professional goal is to become an acquisitions editor or a technical editor. The topic of Native American rappers and identity communication/creation can benefit my professional goals by demonstrating my strong analytical skills. Since my analysis is comprised of three aspects—rapper persona, lyrics, and instrument choice, and is situated within the broader framework of traditional use of music in identity communication, the analysis shows that I am capable of examining multiple threads and weaving them into a complete picture. This thesis also demonstrates my ability to manage and analyze a large amount of information and contributes to and enhances my project management skills.

Committee Member Requests

I asked Dr. Elizabeth Pass to serve as chair on my thesis committee because of her extensive research involving Native American communities and her experience with narrative and storytelling. She has helped guide me in the best way to explore Native American music and its integral role in cultural, collective, and individual identity. Since songs, and more specifically rap lyrics, are a form of narrative and storytelling, Dr. Pass was also able to help me consider all components of the narratives that I researched.

I requested Dr. Traci Zimmerman to act as a reader on my committee because of her research involving identity and what it means to be human in a networked and computer-mediated world. Dr. Zimmerman provided useful suggestions and commentary on the communication and creation of identity that informed the discussion within my research. I was able to use her insight and commentary to inform my research of Native American identity creation and communication.

The other professor I requested to act as a reader is Dr. Cathryn Molloy. I requested Dr. Molloy because of her interests in identity and qualitative research involving non-dominant discourses, as well as her research in linguistic diversity. Since Native American rap is an example of a non-dominant discourse and linguistic diversity, Dr. Molloy was able to offer insight as to the best way to approach the qualitative analysis of Native American rap lyrics.

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